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HELL MODE
The Hardcore Gamer Dominates in Another World with Garbage Balancing
STORY HAMUO
ART MO

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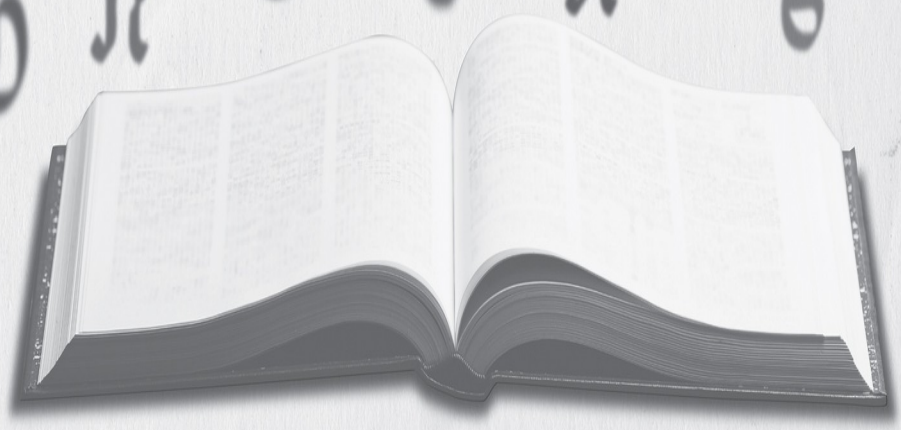

Chapter 1: Daily Life in the Granvelle Residence

It was now the end of October. Allen was currently in the garden of the residence belonging to Baron Granvelle, lord of this fiefdom. The place was beautifully maintained by the house gardener.

Allen thought back to the day he had first started as a manservant of House Granvelle. He had just arrived together with the baron after a five-day journey from Krena Village. Along the way, the procession had stopped at the village where Allen's parents were originally from, but he did not get the chance to meet his grandparents. He planned on going back by himself someday.

Thirty or so servants had lined up to greet Baron Granvelle when he arrived home. Of these servants, the baron had instructed Allen to learn the ropes from Rickel, the head manservant. Rickel was a young man with freckles and brown hair who looked to be around eighteen years old. Apparently he was a rather lazy worker, as the butler had warned Allen to not pick up his work ethic.

Although Rickel often skipped work, he was good at caring for others. He would always answer any question asked of him; he would even answer the questions no one had asked. So when Allen had a spare moment, he asked Rickel the difference between a houseboy and a manservant. As it turned out, the two were very different.

There was an established hierarchy among the service staff. Allen wrote down the whole list in his grimoire, in order of superiority:

- butler, housekeeper
- gentleman-in-waiting, lady-in-waiting, head chef
- coachman, cook, gardener
- manservant, maidservant

The butler, housekeeper, head chef, and gentlemen- and ladies-in-waiting were all considered upper servants. They each commanded great authority and were to be obeyed. The butler and housekeeper oversaw the entirety of the male and female staff, respectively.

The coachmen, chefs, gardeners, and maid- and manservants were considered lower servants. Houseboys and housemaids were not even considered actual servants, and were, in so many words, just the help.

In addition to the hierarchy of the serving staff, Rickel also let Allen in on an important fact regarding noble families. As it turned out, the concept of "family" among the nobility of this world was at odds with Allen's understanding of it from his prior life. That is to say, nobles here considered servants to be part of their family.

Allen finally understood why Rodin had been so happy that he had started crying when Baron Granvelle offered to hire Allen. That offer to become a manservant had, at the same time, been an offer to join the Granvelle family.

It was not easy to become a noble's manservant, even for a commoner. In fact, it was difficult enough becoming a houseboy, and yet Allen had gone straight from serf to manservant. Baron Granvelle had truly gone above and beyond rewarding Rodin for saving Krena Village and contributing so greatly to its development.

Right, I've got to be thankful, Allen reminded himself as he thought back to what Rickel had told him.

"Allen, stand taller! You're my manservant, aren't you?! I still can't reach!"

Directly in front of Allen's face was a tree. Above his head dangled a large, ripe, red fruit. He was standing beneath a large tree in the garden on the grounds with Baron Granvelle's daughter, Cecil, sitting on his shoulders, her legs astride his neck.

Earlier, when Cecil had shot Allen a glare with her slanted, willful, crimson eyes and ordered him to come to the garden, he had thought he would be in for a beating. Instead, she told him to let her ride on his shoulders because there was fruit on a tree and she wanted to pick it. With it being the end of autumn, the fruit looked extra ripe and enticing—although she had never eaten one before, she still wanted it. However, the fruit was so high up that even an adult would not have been able to reach it. Now, up on her perch, Cecil furiously mussed up Allen's hair in vexation.

"Lady Cecil, you might fare better if you were to stand up on my shoulders," he offered.

"That does make sense… You won't get off easy if you drop me! I'll definitely tell my father on you!"

God, I feel so tempted to let her fall for real.

Ever since she had found out that she and Allen were the same age, Cecil had started seeking him out for all sorts of tasks. According to Sebas the butler, Cecil had specially requested Allen as her personal manservant. When Sebas had told Allen, "Good luck," his eyes were filled with sympathy. There was nothing for Allen to do but sigh.

Cecil carefully positioned her feet on Allen's shoulders, then slowly stood up. Allen held her ankles tightly to help her maintain her balance.

"How is it, Lady Cecil?"

"I still can't reach… I can't reach it!"

Can you please just give up already?

"In that case, how about you stand on my hands and I lift you higher?"

"Hm… Okay. Lift me up slowly."

As he slowly lifted Cecil up, Allen ended up seeing her drawers or pumpkin panties or whatever they were called. Of course, he felt nothing from seeing an eight-year-old's underwear. He had, after all, lived for thirty-five years before even coming to this world.

"How is it, milady?"

He heard the sound of the fruit being plucked from its branch.

"I've got it! Lower me slowly."

Allen obediently brought Cecil back down to the ground. She was holding the vivid red fruit in her hands, smiling proudly. She had probably been wanting to pluck it for quite some time now. A quick wipe with her sleeves, then one big bite! The texture was apparently similar to an apple, judging by the crunch.

As Allen watched on, thinking to himself, *Looks like milady is a bit of a tomboy*, the smile on Cecil's face disappeared.

"Peh! Th-This tastes awful!"

As it turned out, the fruit was very sour. Cecil threw the fruit she had worked so hard to obtain onto the ground with a huff. Allen then noticed that the same fruit was scattered across the ground in great numbers, all

rotting away to some degree. The gardener had not bothered to harvest them. Apparently, this fruit was not meant to be eaten.

"Well, there's that saying about fruit you can't reach being sour and all."

"I don't know any such saying! Don't tell me you *knew* this wasn't edible?!"

"Like h— No, I was not aware of it myself."

Phew, that was close. I almost just blurted out "Like hell I did."

"Hmph, then it's fine. I now want to eat a popo to get this awful taste out of my mouth. Go to the kitchen and fetch me one. If they don't have any, go to the market and buy one."

Gah, she's not going to let me off the hook with just "Sorry, they didn't have one," is she?

With no other choice, Allen headed straight to the kitchen. He had a bad feeling, and sure enough, the head chef told him they were out of popos. It was now confirmed: he would have to go all the way to town. He explained the situation to the butler, who then gave him a silver coin. Allen would not be forced to pay for it out of his own pocket.

Allen then left through the back door used exclusively by the servants of the mansion. Generally, the servants were not allowed to use the front door.

But honestly, going into town isn't all that bad.

As a manservant, Allen's job basically entailed miscellaneous tasks. He would be asked to do any number of duties that may or may not have direct relevance to the care of the baron's family. Rickel told Allen to expect to be sent out for errands quite frequently.

The feudal lord's mansion was tucked away in a corner of the city. Upon stepping outside the grounds, Allen found himself in the nobles' residential area, where minor nobility—such as knights and baronets—and influential members of the city lived. The market was farther beyond; to reach it on foot, it took two hours one way.

Unlike the market in Krena Village, the one in the city had a large variety of fruit available.

"Give me one popo, please."

"Sure thing. One silver."

When Allen had asked how many popo he should buy, Sebas had replied that one was sufficient. They were not to needlessly waste money answering the young lady's selfish whims.

Wow, one silver for a single fruit. So expensive. Still, surprisingly, the price here is the same as it was in Krena Village.

Allen turned around and headed back with nothing more than a single popo inside his basket.

There were so many different fruits at the market just now. I wonder if there's an orchard near this city. Wait, but it's going to get cold soon. Do trees bear fruit during winter in this world?

It had been eight years since Allen was reborn into this world. Every once in a while, he realized how much he was still bound to the common

sense of his previous world. Now that he thought about it, he recalled seeing the same fruits offered all year round, regardless of season. It was now nearing November, but the available fruit lineup was the same as in the summer. The general store back in Krena Village had stocked popo and molmo even in December.

Just as Allen was imagining a nearby orchard that produced fruit even in the dead of winter, he heard a powerful rumbling, and his surroundings were suddenly cast into shadow. There must have been something flying overhead. Even without looking, Allen could tell that it was absolutely massive, whatever it was. He lifted his gaze skyward, half expecting to see a dragon.

"Huh?! But that's...!" Allen inadvertently exclaimed out loud with surprise.

What he saw was a rugby ball-shaped ship several dozen—no, at least a hundred meters in length. It was a flying ship. It was slowly descending, most likely toward a landing terminal at the edge of town.

I see, so this world has airships. Oh! Does that mean the fruits in the market are imported from tropical countries further south?

The massive size of the vessel evoked an inexplicable twinge of excitement in Allen's chest and also gave him a hint as to how expansive this world was. He was reminded of the time when he was one year old and his father, Rodin, had pointed out albaherons—the monsters Allen's name was derived from—high up in the sky as they migrated north for winter.

Here in Granvelle City, a place many times larger than his birthplace, Allen's life as a manservant had just begun.

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It's morning.

Allen woke up to the distinctive scent of an old wooden building, one that reminded him of libraries and museums. He had yet to get used to this smell. No light shone through the slats of the wooden window in the small room. It was November, which meant the sun had not yet risen. Nevertheless, it was time to get out of bed. Allen checked his grimoire to confirm that his MP was full again, then proceeded to spend it all training as usual.

Right now, Allen was in his private quarters. To his surprise, he had been assigned his own bedroom. At least, that was the nicer way of putting it—in reality it was little more than a storage room in the attic of the mansion. It was only about four-and-a-half square meters, or fifty square feet, and it had a rather low ceiling. There was unused furniture and dinnerware stored there, so Allen could technically only use two-thirds of the room's space. It was therefore too cramped for a real bed, so Allen slept on a mattress on the floor.

The only reason Allen had received this room in the first place was because all of the other male servants' quarters were fully occupied. Those were all four-person rooms, so Allen was actually quite happy about his

arrangement. Having his own private space made things much more convenient for him, especially for when he wanted to test his skills or even call out smaller Summons.

It's still double the size of a booth in an internet café. It's more than enough.

Back in his days as Kenichi, he had gamed in internet cafés, so he knew how tiring it was to spend the night in a cubicle too cramped to stretch out his legs. With that perspective in mind, he did not have a single complaint about his current accommodations.

Allen then changed into his work clothes. The threadbare hemp outfit he had once worn as a serf had been replaced by a mostly black, well-tailored suit. He had been instructed not to get it dirty as it was his servant's uniform. Even the casual wear that he had been sleeping in before was of a much higher quality than what he had worn mere weeks ago. After getting dressed, he descended to the servants' dining hall on the first floor.

There were already about ten people in the servants' dining hall. Allen had just picked up a wooden tray when Rickel, who happened to be nearby, greeted him with a "Hey there, morning," and invited him to sit together. Allen responded to the greeting and grabbed the seat across from him. Rickel was a rather caring person and asked Allen questions like "How are things?" and "Do you have any questions?" every day.

"How's Lady Cecil treating you?" Rickel asked this morning, looking somewhat concerned.

It was almost unheard of for a manservant to be appointed personal attendant to a member of the lord's family immediately upon entering service. Normally, a man- or maidservant would do all the miscellaneous tasks assigned to them and, if they did a good job, might eventually catch a family member's eye. That member would then reach out and appoint them as a personal attendant. Rickel himself was serving as the head of the other manservants because his service had not been evaluated highly enough to become a personal servant.

The two struck up a lively conversation over their breakfast of soup filled with vegetables and a pitiful amount of meat. Honestly, Allen had more meat in his diet when he was living in Krena Village, especially this year and last year.

"Oh right, yesterday…"

Allen shared how he had seen a ship flying in the sky while he was out buying a popo for Cecil the day before.

"Ahh, was that your first time seeing a magic ship, then?"

"They're called magic ships?"

Magic ships were vessels built from magic tools. They made round trips between Granvelle City and the kingdom's capital three times each month. A one-way journey cost one gold, which was not extremely prohibitive, so Rickel suggested that Allen save up for a ride one day.

Speaking of magic tools, there were many in use in this mansion. There was a large grandfather clock on the first floor, as well as multiple sources of illumination scattered throughout the premises. Allen had heard from Pelomas long before that these were all powered with magic stones.

It looked like Rickel still had a lot more to share, but it was almost time for the lord's family to wake up. So Allen bid him farewell and headed to Cecil's room together with several maidservants.

As the maidservants helped Cecil get changed, Allen was made to wait outside. Her room was on the third floor, directly beneath Allen's. Once she was dressed, his duties mostly consisted of keeping her bedroom clean and tidy and putting away her pajamas. In other words, it was all odd jobs.

Sebas had assigned Allen two primary duties: to attend to Cecil's needs and to serve meals. The latter was a responsibility reserved only for those with exceptional looks. Rickel had never once been called upon for the role for that reason. Allen, however, had inherited quite a lot of his mother's good looks, although he was not very aware of it. What's more, his black hair and eyes were especially eye-catching, given their rarity in this world. These factors together led to his immediate selection for meal service duties.

Now Allen was regularly serving the baron's family's meals as a training experience. His primary duty was, at the end of the day, attending to Cecil. However, there were large blocks of time each day where she would be preoccupied with her lessons and tutors and thus would not call for him. All in all, Allen did not have very much to do.

He now understood how Rickel developed his penchant for slacking off. Although the mansion was quite spacious, there were roughly thirty servants on staff—there were bound to be idle moments. Some people, such as the butler, had an inordinately large number of duties, but generally speaking, there was a lot of downtime.

During the evenings, the baron's family ate together in the dining hall on the second floor. Dinner was always a time-consuming affair, as it was served in courses, one dish at a time. However, it was not overly hectic for Allen, as other staff members brought the dishes up to just outside the hall, where Allen worked together with two other servers.

"You seem to have gotten rather used to your duties, have you not?" Baroness Granvelle asked Allen.

Back when Allen had been Kenichi, he had been a corporate worker for over a decade and, as such, had no experience in waiting or food service jobs. However, the media that he had consumed—including manga, TV shows, and movies—had depicted how to wait on tables in places such as high-end restaurants and hotels. He drew on those references as he went about serving the baron's family.

"Thank you very much, my lady. I have all my mentors to thank for their wonderful guidance."

Allen lowered his head graciously in gratitude. The baron's wife widened her eyes in surprise as an impressed "My!" escaped her lips.

"Darling, are you sure this boy was born a serf?"

"Mm. He's even Talentless, if you can believe it."

Huh? He looked into my Talent? Well, I suppose it makes sense to do a background check before admitting a complete stranger into the family. Ah, that means they must know about all my stats being "E" too.

Cecil perked up. "Huh? You're Talentless?"

"That is indeed the result I received from the Appraisal Ceremony, milady."

Allen was careful not to say "I am Talentless" himself. If he were to be Appraised again, the Talent field would very likely be filled. This way he was laying all responsibility for being registered as Talentless on the clergyman who had officiated his Appraisal Ceremony.

"Really? Well, *I'm* a Wizardess." Cecil smiled smugly and puffed out her chest.

"That is a wonderful Talent indeed, Lady Cecil. It is a very rare Talent to possess, is it not?"

Cecil clearly wanted to be complimented, so Allen laid it on thick, leaving her smiling cheerily from ear to ear. This attitude of his was a big part of why Cecil kept bugging him, but he had yet to realize it.

Hmm, a Wizardess. Which probably corresponds to Wizard. I don't remember seeing that as a class option. I do remember Mage being a one-star class and Archwizard being a three-star, so I guess that puts Wizard in the middle as a two-star class? That's still pretty high up, considering.

As Allen recalled what he had seen about this world's classes before being sent here, Baron Granvelle scolded Cecil.

"Cecil! How many times must I tell you?! Do not mention your Talent without cause!"

"I-I'm sorry, father…"

At the same time, Baron Granvelle also scolded Thomas, his second son.

"And Thomas! Do not cry every time this topic comes up!"

Thomas, who was sitting next to Cecil, sobbed, "I-I-I-I'm so sorry, father…*hic*…for being your only child…without a Talent…"

"Having a Talent or not has no bearing on anything. How many times have I said I would be sending you to Nobles College in the royal capital?!"

"But I want to go to the Academy like Mihai did!"

"You may not. Listen, Nobles College is a fine place. I don't have a Talent myself, so that was the school I attended. In fact, that's where I met your mother, at one of their evening balls."

"Oh, my!" Baroness Granvelle exclaimed, clapping both hands over her flushed cheeks.

Interesting. So Academy City will reject even nobles if they don't have a Talent. Instead, Talentless nobles go to a school specifically for nobility.

Well, it makes sense that they have a place to go. In this world, chances of a noble having a Talent aren't very high.

The balancing for this world made it so that Talents appeared more easily among those born in lower social classes, such as commoner and serf. Even so, Thomas still looked very despondent about being the only one of three siblings to be Talentless.

Ugh, Cecil's glaring daggers at me again. Come on, how is it my fault you got scolded?!

Allen avoided eye contact with Cecil and continued serving as if he had seen nothing.

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Today, Allen only had to work in the morning and had the rest of the day off.

"Are you heading out now?" Rickel asked as the two ate lunch together in the servants' dining hall.

Allen, who was wearing casual clothes instead of his uniform, replied, "Yes, I'm thinking of checking out the city."

"I see. In that case…"

Once again, Rickel, a true exemplar of a superior, briefed Allen on a variety of things. He explained that there was no strict curfew in this house, but anyone who returned too late would earn a summons from the butler. Generally, returning between 9 p.m. to midnight was fine. Allen was relieved to hear there was some leeway.

Two or three times a week, Rickel would go out into town to go drinking. He shared stories with Allen of how he would slip out around 3 p.m. only to get upbraided by Sebas afterward, as if these were feats that he was proud of.

Lastly, he instructed Allen to always keep House Granvelle's crest on his person whenever going out. With that, Allen was allowed to go.

My goal for today: check out the Adventurer's Guild.

So far, Allen had investigated pretty much every store that caught his interest along the way from the mansion to the marketplace. However, whereas the baron's mansion and the nobles' residential area were close to the north gate—this city had gates arranged in all four cardinal directions—the Adventurer's Guild was close to the south gate. Being on the opposite side of the city made it too far away for a quick detour while running an errand.

The fact that it took Allen two hours to reach the marketplace, which was located in the center of the city, meant that it would take him four hours one way to reach the Adventurer's Guild. Allen was worried about getting back too late, so he took off at a run.

There were things he really wanted to confirm for himself today. According to Rickel, the Adventurer's Guild was a worldwide organization, and even the baron would post bounty quests for monsters there at times.

As Allen made his way, he passed someone wearing armor with a gigantic sword on his back. He was most likely an adventurer, one of those in this world who made a living hunting monsters for rewards. Allen had seen quite a few of them while on his shopping trips.

Oh! I'm seeing more and more adventurers around. There are so many people holding swords, staves, and everything in between.

As the south gate loomed up ahead, Allen eventually spotted a large building along the main avenue that adventurers were flowing in and out of. It was surrounded by inns and taverns, leaving little doubt that this was the Adventurer's Guild. Allen stepped inside without hesitation.

Hm, the place looks pretty empty overall. It's around 3 p.m. right now. I guess I missed rush hour. That's a relief.

Quite a few gazes converged on Allen, some because of his hair color, some because he was a child who had come into the guild by himself. However, he walked on, paying them no mind.

So, can I become an adventurer?

Indeed, this was precisely what Allen had wanted to confirm today. He approached the pretty woman standing behind a counter who had been staring at him the whole time.

"Excuse me."

"Yes, how may I help you?"

"Can I become an adventurer?"

"Hmm... How old are you?"

"I'm eight."

"You have to be twelve to register."

"Aww..."

"Sorry."

I see, so no go.

Allen had become a manservant as part of Baron Granvelle's reward to Rodin for his contributions to the development of Krena Village. While he planned on keeping at the work for now, the position was too restrictive to dedicate the entire rest of his life to. He was considering becoming a full-time adventurer after serving the baron for a few years. When the time came, he could tell Rodin that he had tried it for a few years but found that it did not suit him. He had wanted to get a leg up on his next career now, but had just learned that he could not actually become an adventurer until he turned twelve.

He was not finished just yet, though. After all, the age requirement was not the only thing he wanted to confirm today.

"Changing topics, I want to know what kind of monsters live around Granvelle City. Do you have any reference materials that I can read?"

"I'm sorry, only adventurers are allowed to enter the reference room."

Apparently the receptionist was not at liberty to tell Allen anything. He thanked her, then stepped away from the counter. However, he had come all this way, even going so far as to use up half of his day off. He could not

just go back with nothing to show for his efforts, so he started to check out the rest of the Guild to glean whatever information he could.

Oh, these must be quest posters.

One wall was covered all over with sheets of parchment and torn-off stubs, most likely remnants of posters already torn off the wall.

Okay, so this wall is where adventurers get quests from.

The details on the posters were written in Japanese, so Allen was able to read them without issue. Each poster detailed the target monster's name and rank, and the reward for killing it.

Horned Rabbit (Rank E): 1 copper
Goblin (Rank D): 5 copper
Big Toad (Rank D): 8 copper
Orc (Rank C): 3 silver
Armored Ant (Rank C): 3 silver

There was a bit of variety among the monsters mentioned, with all the targets lined up along the length of the board according to rank. Allen promptly wrote everything down in his grimoire.

Problem is, these don't say where each kind of monster is found. Does that mean they appear everywhere?

"Hey, hey, hey, what's a brat doing in a place like this? Kiddo, this ain't a place for squirts like you!"

Just as Allen was getting absorbed in his thoughts, a voice broke his concentration. He turned around to find a man standing before him. He appeared to be in his early twenties and had countless scars across his arms and face. There was a sword on his waist.

"Ah, I'm already on my way out."

Allen had caught on that he was not very welcome here and did not want to bother with getting messed with, so he decided to leave. However, as a shot in the dark, he decided to try asking the adventurer who had just addressed him the question that had just popped into his mind.

"Mister, why don't these quest posters say where the monsters are located?"

"Huh? Well, that's 'cause they're all over the place," the man answered with a somewhat annoyed expression. According to him, the higher-ranked monsters gathered at the foot of the White Dragon Mountains.

By that, he's referring to the mountains on the other side of Krena Village, right? Or does the range extend that far, this close to this city?

Allen had yet to see a map of this world or even of this fiefdom. There was probably one in the mansion's study, but servants were not allowed in that room.

The adventurer revealed that the ranks of monsters increased the further they were from Granvelle City. Allen made sure to properly write down everything he said.

- Near Granvelle City: Rank E monsters
- 1 day’s walk: Rank E to D monsters
- 3 days’ walk: Rank D to C monsters
- 7 days’ walk: Rank C to B monsters

There was also a poster up for a murdergalsh with a high completion reward that no one seemed interested in picking up.

Murdergalsh (Rank B): 200 gold
Currently located: Ranba Village

Wow, the reward amount suddenly jumped way up.

“Is no one going to kill this murdergalsh?” Allen asked the adventurer, who was actually answering quite a few of his questions.

As it turned out, the murdergalsh was a monster that moved around frequently and arbitrarily; even if someone was to head for Ranba Village right now, they could very well find their target gone and their trip a complete waste of time and effort. Add this to the fact that the murdergalsh was on the stronger end of the Rank B spectrum, and little wonder no one seemed interested in hunting it. In most cases, murdergalsh quests remained up for so long that they were eventually left for the realm’s knights to take care of.

“Then why hasn’t anyone accepted this white dragon quest?”

White Dragon (Rank A): 1,000 gold
Currently located: White Dragon Mountains

The parchment at the far end of the board was completely discolored, as if it had been left untouched for decades. The promised reward of a thousand gold coins was such a staggering amount that all other quests paled in comparison.

“Kiddo, how many more questions ya got, huh?”

“It’s not like you’ve got anything to lose, right?”

Only after Allen promised this was the last thing he wanted to know did the adventurer sigh and relent. He explained that the white dragon living in the White Dragon Mountains was too strong for anyone to defeat. However, there were mithril ore veins in the mountains, so the realm really needed the monster gone. Because of this, the reward for the quest kept going up until it eventually reached a thousand gold.

In other words, the mithril veins are precious enough to be worth more than the quest completion reward. That aside, even though this guy’s really curt, he’s actually a pretty nice guy. Did he originally talk to me because he was worried I might get into trouble being alone here?

Just then, a voice called out to the man. “Raven, I’m done reporting to the guild!”

A girl who looked to be in her late teens approached. She was wearing an outfit that exposed her midriff and was armed with daggers. Following right behind her was a woman wearing a hooded robe and holding a staff. She appeared to be in her early twenties. They were both adventurers, and clearly companions of the man named Raven.

“Ready to go drink?” asked the first girl.

“Yep, let’s go,” Raven replied.

“So, what were y— Hm? Who’s this kid?”

“Ah, I’m sorry for being a bother. I was just asking Mr. Raven a few things about monsters. Mr. Raven, thank you very much.”

As he had asked pretty much everything he wanted to know, Allen courteously thanked the man and left the Adventurer’s Guild.

Hm, so all the monsters close to town are low-ranked. I’d have to go far away to encounter ones that give more XP.

This trip had turned out very fruitful. Based on what he’d just learned, Allen already knew what he had to do next.

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It was mid-November, and the days were so cold; the first snowfall of the year could arrive any day now. Allen woke up in his attic room once again. Because it had become common practice for him to wake up at 6 a.m. every day to do his daily skill training, oversleeping was never a concern for him.

In the dim light of his room, he accidentally bumped his hand against a planter. He had “borrowed” this from the storage shed in the yard on his third day here. Several servants had seen him along the way, but he knew that the best thing to do in such situations was to act confident. If anyone asked, “Why are you taking that?” he had prepared to answer with, “Lady Cecil told me to,” but no one had stopped him in the end. In this way, he had successfully brought two planters to his attic room.

One now had an Aroma tree growing inside, the product of a Grass F card’s Ability. This tree had the effect of speeding up Allen’s MP recovery. This was the specific description that Allen had written down in his grimoire:

Effect of Aroma
For 24 hrs after smelling its fragrance, MP recovers to full in 5 hrs

The only way to gain Skill XP was by expending MP, which recovered back to full naturally six hours after the last skill usage. However, thanks to the Aroma tree, that time was shortened by one hour. When his MP recovered, it did so all in one go, so fast that Allen could not see the numbers tick even if he kept his eyes glued to his grimoire.

The other pot was filled with dirt to create Leaves of Life with Grass E cards. Allen now had three Leaves of Life inside his grimoire's Storage, but he had no immediate plans to use them. Based on their name, they likely helped recover HP, but there was no way to tell just how much. Allen had to wait to encounter someone hurt to test their efficacy.

The Leaves of Life were not the only things he was having trouble studying. During the past two years, Allen had been swamped with housework, farmwork, hunting, and playing knight. On top of that, Mash would also tag along behind him practically every moment Allen was at home. Due to this, there was still much that he did not know even about his Rank F Summons, let alone the newer Rank E ones.

Another reason I must succeed in today's negotiation.

Today, Allen planned on asking Sebas for something. After waking up and converting his MP into Skill XP, he went downstairs and had breakfast as usual. Today's fare was, of course, soup with meager ingredients and bread. This was the norm for servants.

After finishing his breakfast, Allen went up to the third floor to put away Cecil's pajamas, empty her garbage bin, and generally tidy up her room. This one room alone was more spacious than his entire house had been when he was a serf.

The third floor was the living quarters of the four members of the baron's family: the baron; his wife; Thomas, his second son; and Cecil, his third child and only daughter. His firstborn son, Mihai, was studying at the Academy at the moment, and therefore his room remained unoccupied.

On the second floor was the family's dining hall, reception room, guest quarters, and the butler's, housekeeper's, and head chef's rooms. On the first floor was the kitchen, the servants' dining hall, servants' quarters, and more guest rooms. There was a cellar underground used both as a pantry for foodstuffs and an armory for weapons and armor. There were quite a few servant rooms underground as well.

Cecil had a light breakfast of bread and soup followed by some tea. She loved spreading a thick layer of jam on her bread. In the afternoon, she had lessons five of the six days of the week. Education was important for nobility.

"You're a new face," said Cecil's tutor of the day when he found Allen waiting for him in the lobby.

"Yes, sir," Allen replied. "His Lordship took me in last month. My name is Allen."

The tutor nodded, but did not say anything else. He silently followed Allen to the reception room on the second floor. Most of Cecil's lessons took place in this room.

Today's teacher is wearing a robe. Is he teaching Cecil magic?

Although Allen had an interest in magic, naturally he was not allowed to take part in the lessons. He opened the door to the room, announced the tutor's arrival, then let him in.

Well, there's no telling whether or not I'd be able to use magic even if I took classes, what with being a Summoner. But still, a magic teacher, huh? And right after I saw all those adventurers equipped with blades and staves the other day. Boy, this really is a fantasy world of swords and magic.

Once Cecil's lessons began, Allen was left entirely to his own devices. It was finally time for the negotiation. He headed to Sebas's room on the second floor.

Knock, knock.

"Come in."

"Pardon me."

Allen explained that he had something he wished to discuss, and the butler gestured toward a sofa, taking the one directly across for himself. The room was quite spacious, at least twice the size of that of any other servant's, as befitted someone of Sebas's stature.

"So, what is it that you wanted to talk about?"

"If possible, I want to take full days off."

Allen did not beat around the bush. Currently, he was allowed half a day off on two out of six days per week. He wanted to combine those two half days together so that he could work five full days and take one full day off.

Sebas went "hmm" and seemed to give it thought. After remaining silent for a while, he said, "Allen."

"Yes, sir."

"How long has it been since you joined us?"

"I started around the end of October, so it has been around twenty days, sir."

The reason behind Allen's request was that he wanted the full day to go outside the city to raise his levels and explore the capabilities of his Summons. The Rank E Summons were around one to two meters long, which made them too large to Summon inside his small attic room. Still, he was a brand-new hire knocking on his superior's door to talk about his off days almost immediately after starting work. This was the same as a new company employee suddenly demanding his salary.

"What if…I said no?"

"Then I'm ready to resign."

"What?!"

Allen's answer shocked even Sebas who, at almost sixty years of age, had been surprised by fewer and fewer things in recent years. It had been quite a while since he was so taken aback he let it show on his face. This was because Sebas understood just how much of a privilege working for a noble truly was.

During this brief period of time, Sebas had received multiple reports of Allen's work performance. He greeted everyone courteously, learned his work quickly, and even helped with the laundry—a task that no one liked doing—when he had spare time. He had a lot of strength despite being a child, and was generous with it, helping make many other servants' jobs

easier. There were even some who doubted his origins as a serf due to his admirable attitude and actions.

Although it was still early, Baron Granvelle and Sebas had discussed raising Allen's salary—which was currently half the amount those of his station normally received—little by little. But then today's talk came out of the blue. Sebas found his evaluation of the boy being slightly shaken.

"The frontier village is a success."

"I'm sorry, sir?" Allen looked confused at the sudden change in topic.

"And the Land Reclamation Decree is still in effect."

The butler closed his eyes and slowly began talking. As long as the Decree was in effect, all nobles owning fiefdoms were obligated to continue establishing new villages and expanding viable farmland. This was true even of Baron Granvelle, who had already created one success story.

"Yes, sir," Allen replied, indicating that he was listening carefully.

"It's still a secret, but we are already in the middle of deciding where the next village should be founded."

Where's he going with this?

"Of course, the new village will need a village chief. This is also confidential for now, but one of those being considered for the role is Rodin."

"Huh?"

As Sebas put it, Baron Granvelle was a man who valued merit over bloodline. As such, he currently held a very high evaluation of Rodin in light of his contributions to Krena Village. He had helped found Krena Village, stood up to provide leadership to the serfs, and was now highly respected by all the villagers. If he was entrusted with starting another village, many would surely follow him. Then, in all likelihood, that new village would host great boar hunts as well. The new village would need a Boar Hunter champion too. The kingdom was in dire need of boar meat, after all.

"And this is why, Allen, your work here holds real meaning."

In so many words, Allen was now working for the lord who ruled the realm of Granvelle. No one could tell how far up he would eventually climb in the hierarchy among the servants, but everything he learned in his current position would prove useful if he were to succeed Rodin one day and become village chief himself. In other words, he should be satisfied with his current schedule of two half days off each week.

Allen's answer, however, was silence. Even after hearing everything Sebas had said, he showed no intention of changing his mind. Back when he had been born in this world, Allen had already decided he would challenge this world with all he had. He had already decided how he would live. Namely, he would focus on leveling up and getting stronger. If he could not have his day off each week, he considered staying here at the mansion a waste of his time.

As the silence dragged on, it was Sebas who finally folded in the end. “So, this is that important to you. I’m not sure I get it, but very well. You may have your full day off.”

“Thank you, sir.”

In the first place, although taking two half days was the general rule, there were indeed a few servants who took one full day off instead due to family circumstances. It was simply because Allen had brought the matter up so soon that the butler felt he had to give at least a little bit of a pushback.

In this way, Allen managed to secure one rest day each week for his leveling up.

Chapter 2: Hunting around Granvelle City

Allen woke up right after 5 a.m., thirty minutes earlier than usual. He quickly put on his casual clothes and then ran out the back door of the mansion to the city gates, relying solely on the illumination from the streetlights.

“What’s the matter, lad? It’s not time to open this gate yet,” the guard told Allen.

“Mm, I know. I’ll wait.”

This gate was mainly used by members of Baron Granvelle’s household as well as those living in the nobles’ residential area. Allen had already learned from Rickel beforehand that it opened at the 6 a.m. bell. Back in Krena Village, the bell had only rung at 9 a.m., 12 noon, 3 p.m., and 6 p.m.; however, here in Granvelle City, 6 a.m. and 9 p.m. were also added to the schedule for a total of six rings every day. As expected of the big city—the mornings were early and the nights late.

While I wait, let’s do one final check.

Allen got out his grimoire and confirmed what he had put inside its Storage.

- Short sword x 1
- Wooden sword x 3
- Stick of firewood x 30
- Rope x 3
- Jerky x 5
- Waterskin x 2
- Throwing stone x 10
- Silver coin x 93
- Copper coin x 2
- Rank E magic stone x 3

During his previous day off, Allen had gone out to town and bought everything that he thought he would need traveling outside the city. He had also adjusted the distribution of the cards in the holders.

- Insect G x 3
- Insect E x 1
- Beast E x 10
- Bird E x 6
- Grass E x 20

Before he had kept twenty Bird E cards, but he had swapped most of them out to adopt a build more suitable for hunting. Consequently, his stock of Rank E magic stones had decreased from more than ten to only three. It was pretty much all tapped out.

Allen had also been informed by Sebas that as a manservant, he was forbidden from carrying weapons on his person. This applied to the short sword that he had received from Dogora as a parting gift. Therefore, the weapon was now inside Storage alongside a few wooden swords.

Wait, I have firewood, the kind for warming rooms, but no flint to light it with. Oh well, I can always buy it while out on another errand. Cecil sent Allen to buy things for her quite often. He could easily drop by a general store along the way.

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!

The large city bell pealed loudly, indicating that it was now six o'clock. The gate guard called out to Allen. "Hey lad, gate's open. You got your pass with you?"

Allen retrieved a badge bearing the crest of House Granvelle's servants from his trouser pocket. This gave him access to all of the city gates.

"M-My apologies. I did not realize you were in His Lordship's service."

"No worries," Allen responded before stepping through. He immediately found his breath taken away and murmured with emotion, "I'm finally outside!"

Allen had dreamed of the view currently spread out before his eyes for eight years. He walked forward as if mesmerized. A part of him heard the gate guard say, "Lad, stay safe," but he was too occupied to pay any mind.

A nearly bare grassland stretched out for about a kilometer from the gate, beyond which was a sparse forest that obscured the horizon. The trees seemed planted at regular intervals, indicating unnatural growth. It had been the same around Krena Village.

After walking for a while, Allen took his crest back out for a better look. The symbol was made of three trees, likely in reference to the wealth of untouched nature in the fiefdom.

Well then, Rank D monsters seem like a good place to start. I don't think I'll lose to something on par with an albaheron.

Allen had already learned at the Adventurer's Guild that the strength of the monsters in this area was proportional to proximity to the White Dragon Mountains. The mountain range lay beyond Krena Village to the southwest of Granvelle City and stretched north to south into the far distance. The base of the mountains was a seven days' walk from the city. Everything that Allen knew about the geography of the vicinity had come from Rickel, since he himself did not have access to the mansion's study where maps of the fiefdom were presumably located.

If I have the misfortune of bumping into a high-ranked monster, I can just aggro it with Hopper and run away.

When used, Insect G's Ability, Provoke, would cause monsters to become enraged. Allen intended to use it as a way to get unwanted monsters off his back.

Because his time was limited, Allen started to run. He stopped only after traversing around ten kilometers.

This should be far enough. Before I start hunting, I want to have a better look at the Bird E Summon. Come on out, Hawkins.

A giant hawk with a wingspan of two meters suddenly appeared in midair.

Come here.

"Pii!"

The Bird E landed and made its way over with stalking steps.

Hold on, it's doing what I told it to even though I never trained it. Is this because of its high Intelligence? Spin around once, please.

Sure enough, the creature slowly turned around in a circle. Allen was delighted to have a Summon that could finally understand orders, but the first order of business was to analyze why. The first possible answer that came to mind was Intelligence. Whereas Bird E only started with 50 Intelligence, Strengthening Lvl. 4 buffed the stat by a hundred, bringing it to 150 in total.

Hm, I'll tentatively take this to mean Summons can understand instructions once they reach 150 in Intelligence. Next: walk one meter to the right.

Hawkins obediently walked one meter to the right.

Nice, so it already understands words. Saves me the trouble. Let's try this with other Summons. Tama, come on out.

A saber-toothed cat appeared, towering at a bit more than a meter tall and two meters in length. Now that Allen was getting to the third tier of unlockable Summons, they were starting to look quite intimidating.

Here, Tama. Come.

The large beast started rolling about on the ground, rubbing its back against the soft green grass and purring with contentment.

Hm, so I can't give instructions to Tama, who's the same rank but only has 28 Intelligence. In other words, the deciding factor really is the Intelligence stat, not the rank of the Summon.

Because he was done confirming the factor behind the Summons' ability to comprehend words and instructions, Allen reverted Tama back to card form.

The other tests I want to do all need an opponent, so we might as well get started. Hawkins, use Hawk Eye and find me a target.

"Pii!"

Then Allen remained in place, waiting and enduring the heat of the sun that had climbed quite high by now. However, even after waiting fifteen minutes, Hawkins showed no sign of returning.

Gah, the encounter rate in this world is way too low.

The term “encounter rate” referred to the probability of encountering a monster while moving around in a game. In many of the games that Allen had played as Kenichi, the player character only had to walk for less than a minute after leaving town to bump into a monster. In contrast, despite currently being more than an hour away from Granvelle City, Allen had yet to see battle. Apparently monsters were not all that common in this world.

I’ve also waited more than an hour for an albaheron to fly overhead. This is just way too inefficient. I’ve got to make the most out of the limited time I have for hunting. You know what? I’ll send out the rest of the Bird E Summons that I stocked.

Allen gave the five Summons that appeared the same instruction he had the first. They cried out in unison, then took off in a burst of fluttering.

Okay, that should make it faster to find monsters to kill. Oh right, gotta take my short sword out. And in exchange, I’ll put the crest inside Storage so that I don’t accidentally drop it.

“Pii!”

This time, a Bird E came back right away. It descended and landed on a nearby tree as if saying, “This way.”

That direction, then?

Allen drew his weapon and cautiously proceeded in the direction indicated. He walked one hundred meters…three hundred meters…five hundred meters…and yet there was still no monster to be seen.

Ugh, is there actually a monster up ahead? I’m going to have to use more precise questions to figure out exactly how far away the target is.

Three other Hawkins were circling overhead, indicating that they had also found monsters.

Thinking about it, I should probably also limit the search radius I want. If it turns out what I’m now heading toward is ten kilometers away, not only is it too far away, I would be continuing on blind for the entire distance.

Just as Allen pondered how to use Hawkins in a smarter way, he noticed a humanoid figure looming ahead.

Hm? Is that a monster?

“Gugagaga.”

It turned out to be a monster about 150 centimeters tall with green skin. It had a cloth wrapped around its waist.

That’s gotta be a goblin, right?

“Gugagaga.”

Allen stopped and faced off against the goblin, who turned out to have four more companions. They all had muscular bodies and were holding swords or clubs. They cackled loudly, as if they thought lunch in the form of an eight-year-old boy had just dropped into their laps.

Crap, I lost the element of surprise.

One of the basics of fighting was to get a preemptive strike in. Allen would have preferred starting off the fight by first taking a few pot shots

from behind cover, but he had let his guard down and barged right in instead.

“Gugagaga!” one of the goblins screamed, after which all of them charged forward, weapons held aloft.

Tamas, come out!

“Grrrrr!”

Allen could freely call out as many Summons as he wanted at the same time without any concern for MP costs. With that, five Strengthened saber-toothed cats surrounded Allen in a defensive formation.

“Guga?”

The goblins faltered in their steps, surprised by the sudden appearance of the Summons.

“Grrrr!”

That moment, five more Tamas appeared behind the group of goblins. Allen was capable of calling forth his Summons anywhere within fifty meters that he had direct line of sight to. Now the monsters were surrounded. Attacking an enemy from behind was the most basic, and the most effective, method of attack. Allen ordered all the sabertooths to use their Ability, Claw. The goblins flew into a mindless panic, clearly not very intelligent. When they turned around to face the assailants behind them, the ones protecting Allen surged forward in attack. Two goblins fell immediately.

Before the others die... Ageha, come on out and use your Ability!

A giant butterfly with a meter wingspan appeared. It flapped its wings toward the goblins, covering them with a yellowish powder. Two of the remaining three monsters fell asleep on their feet so quickly it was as if they had lost consciousness.

Allen took out a rock from Storage and threw it at the face of one of the sleeping goblins with his full strength. However, no line appeared on his grimoire, indicating that it was still alive.

That wasn’t enough to finish it off, huh?

One of the Beast Es dealt the finishing blow to the monster with a crushed-in face.

<You have defeated 1 goblin. You have earned 200 XP.>

I see, so one goblin gives me 200 XP. There’s five of them here, which means a total of 1,000 XP! Yahoo!

Allen could not help but do a little jig inside his mind after calculating how much XP he would gain from this fight. He earned 100 XP from one albaheron and 400 XP from one great boar. Thanks to the adoption of his suggestions, the hunting party at Krena Village had become capable of hunting three great boars each trip, which added up to a total of 1,200 XP.

Efficiency’s always important to consider when grinding. Goblins have better hourly rates, plain and simple.

Back when Allen was Kenichi, he had always thought of earning XP within games in terms of “hourly rates.” Great boars were, including the

time needed to reach and return from the hunting grounds, worth 1,200 XP for six hours. In sharp contrast, he had just earned 1,000 XP before two hours had even passed. That made the hourly rate for great boars 200 and for goblins 500. It was blatantly obvious which was more efficient.

The Hawkins circling above told Allen his next target was already lined up.

Good, good. Let's grab the magic stones in these goblins and then move on. But hm, so Scale Powder causes the Sleep debuff. Just one Ageha was enough to have an effect. This supports my hypothesis.

From what he had observed, Allen had realized there was a certain rule to the debuffs cast by the Insect cards. He wanted to confirm it through today's battles.

For now, he approached the dead goblins and used his short sword to cut into their chests, taking out their magic stones. It was honestly quite a gross task, but magic stones were precious. This was especially true for Allen as a Summoner—magic stones could very likely determine his survival someday. As such, just leaving them untouched was not an option. Soon, Allen's stock of magic stones had gone up by five.

During that time, multiple Tamas kept a vigilant lookout around Allen just in case there were other goblins nearby. Getting attacked from behind was a very real danger when soloing.

All right, that's the harvesting done. Hawkins, I want more goblins! Those who saw a group of five or more just now, come on down. Has to be within three kilometers, though. The rest of you, go back out there and keep looking with Hawk Eye.

Promptly, four of the hawks flew off. Two descended, seemingly having found something that matched Allen's criteria. They indicated the direction, then Allen took off.

After this, Allen completely lost himself in goblin hunting. Time passed in a flash, and before he knew it, the sun had started to go down.

Nice! Thanks to killing eighty goblins and five horned rabbits in total, my level's gone up by two! Days off are the best!

A single goblin gave 200 XP and a horned rabbit gave 10. All together, Allen had earned 16,050 XP today alone. He was now Lvl. 9.

As a result of his testing today, he had also figured out a rule behind the Insect Summons. When he wanted the Insect Gs to use their Ability on albaherons, a monster three ranks higher at D, he needed three of them to work together. Conversely, a single Insect E had been able to affect a group of goblins, Rank D monsters. From this, he derived the following postulates:

- One Summon is sufficient to affect a monster one rank higher with an Ability
- Two Summons are needed to affect a monster two ranks higher with an Ability

- An additional Summon is needed to affect a monster each successive rank higher with an Ability
- The probability of successfully debuffing a monster is not 100% (unaffected by the number of Summons)
- A single Summon is capable of debuffing several monsters at once

The debuff from Scale Powder turned out to be Sleep. It was roughly eighty percent effective against goblins, which was a very high number. Admittedly, this might be a number specific to only goblins, so more testing was needed.

Unfortunately, Allen's side did not exactly get through the day unscathed. The goblins, buff as they were, had proved surprisingly effective at killing the saber-toothed tigers. The Strengthening skill had given the Beast E Summons more HP and Attack, which meant they were still quite low on Agility and Endurance. It certainly did not help matters that their rank was lower than the goblins'.

Allen started off every fight using Insect E, but there were times when he got unlucky and Scale Powder still left more goblins standing than not. When that happened, the Tamas would end up taking more attacks. In order to offset his losses, Allen searched out horned rabbits every now and then for their Rank E magic stones.

Another thing that Allen learned today was that he could not create Rank E Summons using the Rank D magic stones harvested from goblins. When Creating and Synthesizing new Summons, he needed magic stones of the exact same rank.

All right, next group! Where are you, my little goblins?

Groups of goblins were the perfect targets, as they meant more XP in one place with less searching. Allen continued seeking them out, feeling like he had become a goblin hunter. However, all six of his hawks suddenly circled once in the air and then descended.

Hm? What's wrong? Are you tired? I can still go on, though.

Allen recalled when, as Kenichi, he had gone hunting with a party in an online game for eight hours straight until a member yelled, "I'm tired already!"

The birds, which were now standing in a row on the ground, all shook their heads. Apparently the reason for their behavior was not fatigue. With a start, Allen suddenly realized his surroundings had gotten rather dim. It would not be long before the sun set completely.

Wait, is it because you guys can't see in the dark?

Six nods confirmed Allen's guess.

"Oh my god, you guys really are hawks! So you can't scout at night. Uh-oh, I'm in trouble, then."

It was at this moment that Allen finally realized that he had completely lost his sense of direction after all the twists and turns he took chasing

goblins. He had no idea where he currently was nor what direction Granvelle City was.

I'd planned on having Hawkins direct me back home, but it looks like I'll have to figure it out myself.

Thankfully, there was still a little bit of sun, which gave Allen a general idea of direction. He then dashed as fast as he could through the darkening forest. Several hours later, he successfully returned to the city gate. By now, it was pitch black outside.

"Oh, there you are, lad! Congrats on making it back in one piece."

"Th-Thank you, sir."

It was the same guard who had been standing at the gate since morning.

Guards sure have it tough, having to be on their feet all day long, Allen thought while producing his crest. But okay, that was a really close shave. I'm going to have to wrap things up earlier in the day next time.

Thus Allen's first full day off ended with a little bit of introspection.

□□□

It was now mid-December, roughly a month after Allen had started dedicating his one day off each week to hunting. The arrangement made him think back to his elementary school days, when his parents only allowed him to game on Sundays. A rather nonsensical rule, now that he thought about it, but that was neither here nor there.

One day, after finishing work hours, Allen visited a weapons shop around the chiming of the 9 p.m. bell.

"Here ya go," the owner said, handing over iron spheres the size of baseballs. "Still haven't the faintest idea what you plan on doing with those, but whaddya think?"

"Oh, these are perfect! Thank you very much! Sixty silver for all three, right?"

The owner nodded and accepted the money that Allen was holding out.

These feel great in the hand. Now I finally have replacements for my throwing stones.

After exiting the store, Allen put the iron spheres away inside Storage and returned to the mansion.

□□□

Today was Allen's fourth day off. Thanks to spending all his off time so far on hunting, he was now Lvl. 12. The stat increase was great, but it had come with a new problem. Namely, stones broke whenever he threw them. Because he no longer had any chance to use Insect G's Provoke, he replaced most of them with Beast E instead, which buffed his Attack even higher. All the throwing stones that Allen had brought along from Krena Village had been shattered in attacks against goblins.

As replacements, Allen had ordered iron balls from a weapons shop. According to the owner, it was not all that much trouble, as it was simply a matter of changing the shape of a lump of iron originally meant for making

a weapon anyway. Because of this, he was willing to part with one ball for twenty silvers. Allen had ordered three.

The list of things I need to buy just keeps growing. Armor is a given, but I also want a fire-starting magic tool, and I want to eventually have ten iron balls in total. Of course, I really also ought to get a better weapon. But that's at the lowest priority, since I mainly fight with my Summons.

Allen reviewed the shopping list that he had written down in his grimoire. The fire-starting magic tool cost three gold. There was a huge range of prices when it came to armor, but the higher-end ones naturally cost several gold. The same was true for weapons.

I really feel like a game character who's arrived at the starting town and is gathering his first set of equipment!

Despite being in need of money, Allen's heart still beat quickly in excitement. He recalled the emotions he had felt from visiting a new town inside a game and anticipating the new equipment available.

Hunt monsters, earn XP, use money to improve my equipment. Now this is the old-school playing style. Though the money I'm using is from my salary and not from selling drops.

Servants at House Granvelle received their salaries at the end of each month. Allen's monthly salary was fifty silver. A hundred silver equaled one gold, which meant his annual salary was six gold. Servants of House Granvelle were exempted from the head tax.

The monthly salary for each rank in the household's servant hierarchy was as follows: the top rank, which the butler belonged to, received five gold; the second rank, which the head chef belonged to, received two gold; the lowest rank, which Allen belonged to, received one gold. The reason Allen was receiving only half the amount that was normal for his standing was because he was under twelve years of age. Rickel had been the one to tell Allen all of this; as head manservant, he received one gold and fifty silver each month.

If I could register goblin-killing quests with the Adventurer's Guild, I would earn more. Oh well, it's not like I need money so badly it'd kill me. And most importantly, the Guild building is too far away anyway.

In every one of the fights so far, his Summons tanked all the attacks, and Allen had yet to get hurt even once. Because of this, armor was not very high on his list of priorities either. He was content with waiting for his money to slowly accrue.

Once again, Allen got back late that night. He was about to head back to his own room when he bumped into Rickel.

"Hi, Mr. Rickel. Good night."

"Ah, there you are. I know it's late, but Sebas is calling for you."

"What?"

Allen could not remember doing anything that would merit being called for, but ignoring the summons was not an option. After thanking Rickel for conveying the message, he headed to the butler's room.

Knock, knock.

"Excuse me. It's Allen."

"Mm, come in."

Despite it being quite late at night, the butler was still willing to talk. When Allen entered the room, Sebas gestured toward one of the sofas.

"I heard you wanted to see me, sir."

"Indeed."

A long silence then ensued. Allen patiently waited for Sebas to broach the topic.

"Allen. Your work in the mansion is beyond reproach. I've heard from the other servants that you are diligent and conscientious."

When Sebas finally started speaking, it seemed like he was carefully choosing his words.

"Thank you very much, sir."

"However, work is not the only thing that matters. What you do in your off time is also important. You must remain constantly self-aware of your identity as a member of House Granvelle."

What's this? Am I getting scolded for something?

"Of course, sir."

Sebas looked straight into Allen's eyes. "What are you doing on your days off?"

"I'm sorry, sir?"

On his days off, Allen would head out before the sun rose. In a great hurry too. And when he returned, it was invariably after 9 p.m. With this having continued for a full month, it was only natural his behavior would lead to questions.

Just as Allen was considering whether to tell the truth or not, Sebas said, "I'm not letting you out of this room until you answer my question."

I see. Well, I don't have a choice, then.

Allen was hunting around Granvelle City, and while he did his best to avoid people, there were still times he passed by adventurers. It was only a matter of time before word of a black-haired child hunting in the area spread. Not that he had any intention of stopping what he was doing.

"I've been hunting monsters," Allen replied truthfully.

"You've been hunting monsters?"

"Yes, sir. On my days off, from morning to night, I've been hunting monsters outside the city."

The butler's eyes widened in surprise. He felt as if he was looking at the very concept of absurdity given the form of an eight-year-old boy.

"Is that why you asked Rickel about the White Dragon Mountains and the Adventurer's Guild?"

He reported me?

Allen felt resentful toward Rickel for a split second but then thought better of it. If the butler asked Rickel about the possibly suspicious behavior of one of his charges, it was only natural for him to share what he knew.

“Yes it is, sir.”

“So that is why you asked for full days off. Why do you hunt?”

“Because I am Boar Hunter Rodin’s son. I want to grow up into an upstanding person like my father one day.”

To Allen’s own surprise, the words flowed naturally from his mouth. He realized he believed what he had said.

I see, so I really am the son of Rodin, the man who wanted to become a hunter. I just happen to also really love hunting. I guess we really are father and son.

Allen was satisfied with the answer that he had just found within himself. Despite being far apart, he and his father had a common bond in hunting. It was a very deep connection, as far as bonds went, as this was their shared purpose in life, their raison d’être. Allen even suspected that him being born to Rodin had been an intentional arrangement on the part of the gods.

“Hunting on my off days is what I live for.”

“What you live for, huh? So it’s that important to you. Hmm…I suppose you really are Rodin’s son after all.”

Understanding dawned on Sebas’s face. Surely, Allen had been greatly influenced by his father while growing up. The son of the village’s champion now declared hunting his reason to exist. Back when he had said he would quit being a manservant if he did not get full days off, his eyes had been lit by the same glint of resolve.

“I see. Well, having a raison d’être is a good thing, as long as it doesn’t cause other people trouble like Dudley’s does.”

Dudley? That’s…the head chef, right? Ah, I do remember him and Sebas locking horns every once in a while.

The head chef loved cooking above all else. By and large that was a good thing. However, he would go over budget buying ingredients to experiment with dishes. He showed no qualms about standing up to Sebas despite being one tier lower on the hierarchy, likely due to them being close in age. During his time at the mansion, Allen had already happened upon the butler and head chef shouting at each other multiple times, the former repeatedly upbraiding the latter for not staying within budget, and the latter insisting on raising the quality of the food being served.

“Yes, sir. I’ll be careful not to trouble anyone else.”

“If I can be entirely frank with you, Allen, I want your work in this mansion to become what you live for. Just like it did for me.”

“Y-Yes, sir.”

Well that’s gonna be difficult. After being reincarnated and all, I don’t want to live out my years in someone else’s service.

Allen’s half-hearted answer and stiff smile caused Sebas to sigh and shrug his shoulders.

“Well then... What have you been doing with the horned rabbits you bring back?”

“I’m sorry, sir?”

Apparently Sebas was under the misconception that Allen had been hunting horned rabbits close to the city walls. The thought that Allen was hunting goblins hours away had not even crossed his mind.

"There's no need to hide it. You've been selling them to a butcher's for some pocket money, yes?"

Ahhh, so that's what he really wanted to know. Should I correct... Nah, let's play along.

"I'm sorry, sir."

"Mm, it's not a very good look for a member of House Granvelle to be earning pocket money on the side. There's no telling what rumors might be generated from this."

"I'm sorry, sir," Allen repeated, doing his best to seem apologetic. The truth was that he only harvested the magic stones and left the rest in the forest. He did not want to waste the time it would take him to drop by the butcher's after hunting, after all. Currently, XP was much more valuable to him than money was.

"But that said, we can hardly let the meat go to waste. As such, bring the horned rabbits back. We will pay you for them, separate from your monthly salary."

"Really?!" Talk about a nice surprise!

The meat that he had been discarding now had value.

"You're that happy about it? I'm making it clear now, but we won't be paying you all that much. One silver for each horned rabbit is all we'll give."

This was still more than enough. In this way, Allen's hunting was—partially—exposed to Sebas the butler.

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The first off day since Allen's confession to Sebas rolled around. Just as before, he left the mansion first thing in the morning and ran to the city gate, where the usual guard was standing sentry. Allen was impressed with how the man could keep at it this early and in such cold weather.

"You heading out again today, lad?"

"Yes, sir."

The two exchanged light banter while waiting for the 6 a.m. bell. Last time, the guard had told Allen he did not need to show his crest anymore. Because of that, it was now inside his Storage. Apparently the check was not as strict as it was when using train or plane tickets in his previous life.

The gate soon opened at the usual time, and Allen took off. The first snowfall had come, and the year was almost over. The casual wear that he had been issued was not very thick, but because he was moving about so vigorously, he did not really feel the cold.

The city receded farther and farther into the distance.

All right, this should be far enough. Come on out, Hawkins.

Six Bird E Summons appeared at the same time several dozen meters in the air. After Allen instructed them to go look for goblins, they scattered in various directions.

Allen had tried hunting other monsters but ultimately concluded that goblins gave the highest hourly rate. Only goblin groups gave more than 1,000 XP for each encounter. There were other Rank D monsters that gave more XP per monster than goblins did, but they wandered in much smaller groups. Goblins also appeared much more frequently than other monsters did, which definitely helped make it much more efficient hunting them.

Today, let's aim to kill a hundred goblins and a few horned rabbits for their magic stones and meat. Bringing five back should be enough, I think?

While waiting for his Summons to return, Allen decided on his quota for the day. The rate of encounter with monsters was not all that high. If he did not have Hawkins constantly scouting from the sky, he might only have three encounters a day. Hawk Eye was proving helpful in improving Allen's hunting efficiency.

Before long, one Hawkins returned, and the day of hunting kicked off.

Three hours later, Allen stopped to eat his lunch of steamed potatoes and molmo. Because he was running around all day long, it was important to give his body the energy it needed. The molmo fruit also served to replenish his liquids, making it a very efficient food. Of course, it did not hurt that it was delicious too.

Just as Allen was biting into a molmo, one Hawkins landed on the branch of the tree beside him.

"Welcome back. Wait a bit. I'm almost done eating."

"PII!"

Hm? What's this?

The bird's behavior seemed somehow different from usual. A quick look upward revealed three other Hawkins circling overhead. That meant they had found targets for Allen to hunt, but they were not coming down, almost as if yielding priority to the one that had landed.

Huh?

"PIIII!" The Hawkins on the tree cried out again, louder this time, and with a noticeable tone of urgency.

"Did something happen?"

Allen put his half-eaten potato into Storage and stood up. Immediately, Hawkins spread its wings and slowly flew off. When it looked down and confirmed that Allen was indeed following along, it then started flying faster and faster.

Where's it hurrying to?

Of the Summons, Bird cards had high Agility as a base stat. After being Strengthened, Hawkins's speed was nothing to scoff at. Thankfully, Allen was capable of keeping up thanks to the buffs he received from the cards.

We've gone quite far. Where's it taking me?

Fifteen minutes of running later, Allen's ears picked up faint shouts coming from up ahead.

"Run away, Milci! I'll hold them back!"

"What are you saying, Rita?! I can't leave you and Raven behind!"

“Milci and Rita, you should both go! It’s too late for me!”

Hm? Are they in battle? Wait, “Raven”?

When Allen got closer, he spotted the three adventurers he had met before in the Adventurer’s Guild. The man with the sword who had answered all of Allen’s questions, Raven, was clearly wounded. The woman with the staff was supporting him, while the dagger-wielding girl was standing protectively in front of the other two.

Although two goblins lay dead on the ground, there were still four currently concentrating their attacks on the dagger girl, whose name was apparently Rita. One of her arms seemed to be out of commission, merely dangling and dripping blood. Despite this, she was putting up a good fight with her one good hand, desperately standing her ground. The goblins inched closer slowly, their faces warped in sneers.

When he got within twenty meters, Allen took out an iron ball from his Storage and threw it with all his strength.

Here goes the first pitch.

Squish!

“Guga?”

The iron ball showed no sign of shattering even after completely caving in one of the goblins’ faces. The monster crumpled to the ground.

“Looks like you need some help, Ms. Rita!”

“Huh? Who’re you?”

Wha— Don’t turn around! You’re still in a fight!

Another iron ball made contact with a goblin’s face. This one, however, remained on its feet, albeit very shakily. Apparently the iron ball alone was not quite enough to guarantee a one-hit kill every time.

“The ones that took my attack are still alive. Don’t let your guard down!”

“O-Okay…”

Rita looked taken aback by the sudden arrival of reinforcements, but there was no time to let her compose herself. Allen threw his last ball. Unfortunately, the goblins were now aware of him and had their guards up. The goblin he was targeting managed to raise an arm in time to block the projectile. The impact clearly broke the arm, but the monster still had more than enough vitality to pose a threat. It shifted its club to its other arm.

There are two goblins left who can still attack. Guess I have no choice but to get personal.

Allen had zero intention of showing his Summons to other people, so he drew the short sword on his waist and charged out in front of Rita. He had already reverted all Hawkins to card form when he had first heard the group’s shouts.

“I’ll take on the unhurt one! You take the one with one arm!”

“O-Okay…”

Allen’s chosen opponent rushed toward him, brandishing a rusty, beat-up longsword. When Allen hunted albaherons, he had started the fights by draining their power using Insect F Summons. This time, that option was

not available to him, leaving this a purely physical fight without the use of any abilities on either side.

Because Allen did not want to unnecessarily wear down the edge of his short sword, he opted to dodge all of the goblin's wide swings. As he had already reached Lvl. 12, after adding in the buffs he received from his cards, his Attack and Agility were both above 300. He closed in on his opponent in the blink of an eye, slashed at its throat, then backed off to avoid the jet of blood. The monster crumpled to the ground, dead.

Hm, that was easy. So I'm already strong enough to effortlessly handle Rank D monsters.

The reason Allen never fought in person up until now was because he did not want to get his valuable outfit, which had been issued to him, dirty with blood spurts.

When Allen turned around to aid Rita, he found her delivering the killing blow to her opponent. She was capable enough of winning the fight, though she did apparently suffer a few more shallow wounds in the process. The two then went over and finished off the two goblins who had taken iron balls to their faces.

"Raven!"

"Ugh…"

Allen took a closer look at the man and confirmed that he was indeed the same person he had bumped into at the Adventurer's Guild. Rita and Milci called his name in desperation, but all he could do was let out a weak rattle. He was clearly on the verge of death.

This lady called Milci looks like the party healer. Does the fact that she can't do anything mean she ran out of MP? There's no other choice; it's time to test out a Leaf of Life.

When Allen approached, the two women became slightly wary. He was a black-haired boy clearly under the age of ten who had appeared out of the blue to make short work of an enemy they were struggling so much against. Allen did not fault them for their caution.

"Excuse me, I have an herb. Would you like me to use it?"

"Really?!" the two women cried out in unison, their expressions instantly brightening up.

"We'll pay however much you want! Please save Raven!"

Allen pretended to reach behind and pulled out a Leaf of Life from Storage.

I never expected the first test subject to be someone so close to dying. Hm, this probably looks different from every other commonly used herb out there, so I should probably cover it with my hand.

The name of the item hinted at its ability to restore HP, but Allen had yet to test it out. Because he had no idea how to actually use the wide, flat, perilla-like leaf, he reached out with it clenched in his fist and attempted to press it directly against the wound on Raven's abdomen.

The two women worriedly looked between Raven's blank face and Allen's actions. They were so desperate they were grasping at straws for any scrap of hope.

Please don't look at me with so much expectation in your eyes. I have no idea how much this can heal him. In the first place, I don't even know for sure that it's an HP recovery item.

When the Leaf of Life made contact, it shone brightly and then disappeared like bubbles. Right after that, Raven's wound, which had been deep enough to reach even his organs, closed back up gradually right before their eyes. Soon enough, the only sign there had been a wound was all the sticky blood left around the area.

Raven regained consciousness and slowly opened his eyes, his mind completely clear. He gingerly touched his stomach, then looked down at it.

"Really?" he murmured in bewilderment, realizing that he had made a full recovery.

"RAVEN!" his two companions cried, cheering with relief.

"Wh-What happened…?" The man failed to understand how he was still alive. He asked Milci if she had healed him, but she shook her head, wiping tears from her eyes.

"I'm glad you're fine. Ms. Rita, was it? Here, I'll heal your arm too," Allen said before pressing another Leaf of Life against her dangling arm. Of course, he made sure to hold it in a way that it was not visible.

As all three adventurers looked on, time seemed to rewind for the arm. Before long, it was back to being as good as new. Some of the bones inside had been broken, but Rita had no problem lifting it up. She clenched and opened her hand multiple times in marvel.

Suddenly, all three started and shouted in unison, "Flower of Muellerze!"

As Raven and Rita wondered why Allen had used such a precious herb for their sake, the boy said, "Well, it looks like you're both fine now. What about you, Ms. Milci? Are you hurt?"

Although she did not have any obvious external wounds, Allen did have one last Leaf of Life, so he offered it just in case.

"N-No, I'm fine!" Milci replied, thrusting out both hands in a fluster and shaking them vigorously to demonstrate how healthy she was.

"I'm glad to hear it. Can you guys get back on your own? Granvelle City's that way."

Because he always hunted until the last available minute, Allen was now very practiced at deriving the direction to Granvelle City based on the location of the sun.

"Huh? Uhhh, yeeeaaah. We're good. If I'm not injured, I can easily take care of goblins," Raven responded.

When Raven stood up, he realized that he was unarmed. The group had probably been attacked quite a distance away, which was when he had lost

his sword and gotten hurt. So he walked over and picked up one of the rusty swords dropped by a goblin.

“Well, then my work here is done,” Allen said, turning to leave. “You guys take care.”

“No, wait!” Raven protested before stopping himself. Now that he was no longer on the verge of death, he finally had the composure to take a good look at Allen. “Huh? Aren’t you the kid I met at the Guild?”

“Yes, I am. Why?” Allen replied curtly, an annoyed look on his face. If you can get back by yourselves, then do it already. I really want to get back to hunting.

This whole incident had cost Allen about an hour of time. This was his precious day off. He was itching to get going.

“Please let us thank you.”

“Your gratitude is enough, thanks.”

However, Raven stopped him once again. From Raven’s point of view, Allen had saved his party from certain death and even used two Flowers of Muellerze on them, an item that cost several gold per pop. It would eat at his conscience to not return that favor in some way.

I still have sixty goblins to go for my quota for the day. Let me go already!

Of course, Raven had no idea what Allen was thinking. “Can’t we thank you in some way?” he asked one more time.

Seeing how persistent Raven was, Allen gave it some thought, then said, “In that case… Mr. Raven, right? You’re an adventurer?”

Raven spread his arms. “I am, as you can see. Why?”

“I’m in a hurry today. But when we meet again next time, tell me a lot more about adventurers.”

“Sure.”

Raven waited for Allen to continue.

Why does he look like he— Bro, that’s all. I’m done. What else do you want me to say? Ah, I do have one thing.

“Also, don’t tell anyone about me.”

“Of course. I won’t tell anyone.”

Milci and Rita also nodded. Then Raven waited once again for Allen to continue.

“Nothing else really comes to mi— Oh, right, can I have all these goblins’ magic stones? Oh! Speaking of magic stones!”

Finally, something substantial came to Allen’s mind. Once, when he visited a magic tool shop in Granvelle City to check out items that he might need while adventuring, he had also asked the store owner if he had Rank E magic stones for sale. The owner replied that he only bought them and was not selling any. Now, the idea to have Raven and his group gather some came to Allen’s mind.

“What? Did you think of something?”

“So, I’m gathering Rank E magic stones.”

“Okay.”

“So, if you really want to thank me, let me have these goblins’ magic stones, then also get me a hundred Rank E ones.”

“A-Are you sure that’s all you want?”

“Of course. Are you based in Granvelle City?”

“Yep, we’re staying long-term at an inn in the city.”

“I see. Where is it? I’ll drop by to pick the magic stones up in person. Please leave them with reception and tell them to expect someone named Allen to come for them. How long would it take you?”

According to Raven, they could gather that number in a week. Although he still seemed somewhat unconvinced that this was enough as a reward, he finally backed down.

Allen wasted no time in cutting out the magic stones from the goblins’ bodies. “Well, I won’t see you off. I hope you get back to town safely.”

“Thank you for everything once again.”

“Thank you.”

“Thanks!”

Then Allen took off into the forest, not even sparing a single backward glance. He stopped only after having gotten quite far away.

I lost so much time from that. But, well, I did gain a hundred Rank E magic stones in exchange, so I guess I can consider it a wash. Hm, what should I do now? Should I get back to hunting, or should I sit down to go over what I just learned?

Allen decided on the latter.

First, this Leaf of Life. Now I know for sure it recovers HP. I honestly never thought this would be how I’d end up testing it.

He stared closely at the last remaining piece in his hand. By all appearances, it looked like a perilla leaf from his previous world. He now knew that it could be used by pressing directly against a wound.

There are two kinds of recovery items. This is most likely the fixed amount kind.

Different games had different names for HP, but in all of them, the game character would be considered dead when that specific number reached zero. Items that could be used to replenish health were called recovery items, and these fell into two large classifications.

- Ones that healed by percentage of max HP
- Ones that healed a fixed amount of HP

For the former, if a character had maximum 1,000 HP and used an item that replenished 30% health, that would work out to a recovery of 300 HP. For the latter, if the item healed a flat value of 500, then it would just heal 500 HP regardless of the character’s max HP value.

In light of this, the way Rodin and Raven each recovered made for an interesting contrast. After using a Flower of Muellerze, it had taken Rodin

another full month before he could walk again. On the other hand, after using a Leaf of Life, Raven had become fully conscious, had no trouble standing up, and had even gone to pick up a goblin's sword.

The obvious conclusion to draw is that the former is percentage-based and the latter is a fixed number.

If Leaf of Life was percentage-based, then it would be 100%. That was far too good to be true, especially considering it was an item generated from a mere Rank E Summon. Raven's max HP was probably still low, which was why one Leaf of Life had brought him back to perfect health.

Well, that's enough about Leaf of Life. Next thing to check is the log on my grimoire.

```
<You have defeated 1 goblin. You have earned 160 XP.>
<You have defeated 1 goblin. You have earned 160 XP.>
<You have defeated 1 goblin. You have earned 160 XP.>
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The last three lines were from the goblins that Allen had killed as a joint effort.

This amount of XP is only 80% of what I normally get when I fight alone. The people present during the fight were me and three other adventurers, but only Rita and I actually fought. But if I got 80% because of that... Hmm, that means XP distribution is not divided by the number of fighters. It's probably more along the lines of receiving 80% when fighting as part of a group.

Some games required players to hunt together in large groups. In such situations, if XP was divided equally among all participants, each person would get a very limited amount and it would not be worth it. Instead, those games set it up so that participants gained a marked down percentage of the maximum XP givable by the target—for example, sixty or eighty percent—unrelated to the actual number of people fighting.

The great boars gave me 400 XP. If that was 80%, then it means one great boar gives 500 XP in total. But there's no way a Rank C monster gives only 2.5 times what a goblin does. It would make more sense for it to give something along the lines of 1,000 XP.

Based on what he had experienced firsthand and learned about combat in this world, Allen deduced what he thought were two rules about XP distribution from fighting in a group.

- Fighting as a group of 2 to 4: Each person gains 80%
- Fighting as a group of 20 to 40: Each person gains 40%

Yep, I think that's more like it.

Allen made sure to make proper notes in his grimoire about what he had just figured out regarding Leaf of Life and XP distribution.

Now, the most important thing. Hawkins, come on out.

A Bird E appeared. As they were now in an open area, Allen would have normally Summoned it up in the air. This time, however, he purposely Summoned it on the ground, right in front of him.

“Why did you disobey my orders?”

The bird hung its head as if to convey how sorry it felt.

“What were my orders? ‘Find me a group of five or more goblins within three kilometers that I can reach in a straight line without bumping into adventurers.’ Right?”

The bird hung its head even lower.

“Is it because you wanted to save those adventurers?”

The bird bobbed its head once. The sight left Allen struggling quite a while for a response.

“In other words, you…have an ego. You’re self-aware.”

The bird tilted its head, puzzled either by the concept, the terms, or both.

“I see, so you’re not intelligent enough for that kind of thinking. But, hm… So the Summons possess consciousness.”

Up until now, Allen had thought of his Summons as mechanical existences that only moved as he told them to, rather like androids or computer programs. However, that was apparently not the case. Hawkins had chosen to prioritize its own will above a direct instruction from Allen and instead led him toward a group of adventurers who were about to die. In other words, Summons were sentient and could think for themselves.

So, these are the Summons created by the gods above.

If it was really the God of Creation who had created humans and this world, then it was probably a piece of cake for him to create Summons with egos.

When Allen reached forward to rub Hawkins’s head to offset his strict tone from earlier, the bird’s expression immediately turned into one of delight.

“All right, I’ll change up the instruction next time onward. Make sure to follow them, okay?”

“Pii!” Hawkins cried loudly and spread its wings, a gesture that Allen interpreted as “Okay!”

Chapter 3: Huntsman

It was now the end of December. The week after saving Raven and his companions, Allen went hunting again. Afterward, he picked up the promised Rank E magic stones. Raven had gone out of his way to wait for Allen to hand the pouch over in person rather than leaving it with reception as originally agreed.

Allen was currently in line for a meal at the servants' dining hall, deep in his thoughts, when Dudley suddenly talked to him.

"Something got ya down, lad?"

The head chef had started engaging Allen in conversation every once in a while as of late. The pensive look on Allen's face had apparently caught his attention.

"Oh, no, I'm fine, sir."

"Here, have this. Eat up." A rather large piece of meat was added to Allen's bowl of soup.

"Thank you, sir."

Rickel, who had just been served, whirled back around. "Why does Allen get some and I don't?! I want meat too!"

"Hah? An' what've you done that makes ya think you deserve meat? Allen's already brought back ten horned rabbits. What 'bout you?"

"Awww, c'mon!"

Allen had delivered a total of ten horned rabbits from the past two days he had gone hunting. Five rabbits per day was the quota that he had set for himself, figuring that was the limit of what a normal eight-year-old boy might be able to bag after a full day hunting outside. Plus, he could never have too many Rank E magic stones.

In reality, however, Sebas had been more than impressed with Allen bringing back five horned rabbits each time. After all, the number of monsters was not all that high in this world in the first place. Horned rabbits were also solitary, so hunting them was not very efficient. Due to this, being able to catch two or three a day was already considered a job well done.

The head chef was absolutely over the moon about the meat being brought back and happily butchered the beasts. This was the reason he had started speaking to Allen recently, and also why he gave the boy extra meat during meals.

"By the way, have ya heard? Young Master Mihai will be visiting home next spring."

Hm? Mihai...is the oldest son, right? The one who went to study in Academy City?

"I'd not heard."

"When he last left, I asked him to bring back some honey sold in the royal capital. You ever tried any? It's so sweet like ya wouldn't believe."

“I’m afraid not. But now you’ve gotten me interested.”

“Hah, I was hoping you’d say that! If ya catch me a few big toads when they pop up next spring, I’ll secretly share some of the honey with ya!”

“Really?! I’ll do my best!”

Damn, how long has it been since I’ve had honey? Hmm, big toads, was it? Is it because they’re hibernating right now that they only appear in spring?

“What?! Mr. Dudley, what’re you saying to Allen?! Big toads are Rank D monsters! And Allen, don’t you take him seriously!” Rickel cried loudly, drawing the attention of other nearby servants.

After breakfast, Allen went upstairs to clean Cecil’s room as usual. When that was done, he then did the laundry. He did not have to stick to Cecil’s side at all waking hours of the day, so he had spare time every so often. He often spent that time proactively helping out other servants, be it with cleaning or other miscellaneous jobs.

He just so happened to be cleaning in the garden when Knight Captain Zenof arrived. He did not live in the Granvelle mansion, but his duties did require him to drop by often, including when he had to report to Baron Granvelle in person.

“Welcome, Sir.”

“Mm.”

Rickel had told Allen quite a bit about the chivalric order. The kingdom was not currently embroiled in any wars, and even if it were, the fiefdom of Granvelle was not on the border. As such, the knights mainly dismantled bandit rings and killed monsters that were causing trouble for the citizens. While adventurers could also handle problems with monsters, a variety of circumstances sometimes made it difficult for them to do so. And that was where the knights came in.

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Nighttime arrived, and it turned out Zenof was staying for dinner. It was not all that rare for the knight captain or vice-captain to do so. As always, Allen took part in serving the meal.

“It looks like you’ve gotten quite used to your work,” Zenof commented appreciatively.

“Thank you for your words, Sir.”

“You do your father proud. As I’m sure you’ve already heard, Krena Village has successfully finished hunting twenty great boars this year.”

“It is a relief to hear.”

Krena Village had met this year’s quota by the end of November. Thanks to the villagers squeezing in three hunts before the baron’s arrival, they had ended up quite ahead of schedule. Before Allen left, Rodin had told him that they now had the leeway to scale back and leave ten days between each of the remaining hunts.

“But why aren’t we getting any of the meat even though they hunted so many?” Thomas asked with a scowl. “Whenever winter comes, we’ve *always* had boar meat!”

Now that he’s mentioned it, it’s true I haven’t seen much meat here at the mansion. The great boars killed in October should have already arrived in town by now.

The meat from the great boars needed to be preserved first—a process that normally took around two months—before being transported to Granvelle City. Consequently, several metric tons of it should have arrived in town not too long ago. However, it had yet to appear in the dinner fare at the Granvelle mansion.

The baron chastised his son and told him to not make a fuss, leaving the boy visibly dejected. Baron Granvelle was a man who was rather strict with his children.

Back at Krena Village, the baron did explain during his audience that the reason he asked the hunting party to double the number of great boars was because of a royal decree. In other words, it was the king who wanted the meat. Did all of it get sent to the royal capital, then? On that super huge magic ship?

As Allen was in the middle of his thoughts, Thomas turned to the knight captain and asked with hopeful eyes, “Zenof, can you catch a deer for us this year?”

The knight shot the baron a look. The latter shook his head.

“I’m sorry, Young Master Thomas. Hunting for food is not part of our duties as knights.”

I mean, the knights did come to Krena Village to hunt great boars. I guess the baron means for this to be a teaching opportunity for Thomas.

“Aww, c’mon!” Thomas made his sullenness clear on his face.

“Thomas, that’s enough! The knights aren’t here to listen to your whim and fancy!”

Finally, Baron Granvelle lost his temper with his son’s complaints. Thomas flinched in fright, prompting the baroness to intervene.

“Darling, I’m sure Thomas knows better. Right, Thomas? But it is true that if we have no boar or deer, the coming New Year’s Greeting is going to be rather modest.”

The Greeting was a celebration hosted at the feudal lord’s mansion at the very start of each new year. It was normally supposed to be a grand affair.

“That’s just how this year is. There’s not much we can do about it.”

Both the baron and butler sighed bitterly. This prompted the baroness to also look down sadly. Thomas, after seeing everyone’s reactions, turned to Allen.

“Allen.”

“Yes, Young Master Thomas?”

“You’re good at hunting, right? Catch a deer for us.”

“Are you referring to a white deer?”

In this world, even barons and their families had to live quite frugally. Food was one of the very limited sources of enjoyment in this world. And thanks to Allen catching horned rabbits, the meals this family enjoyed had improved quite significantly. Of all people to make such contributions to their diet, it had been an eight-year-old boy with rare black hair and eyes. Naturally, Allen’s offerings had garnered him quite a lot of attention. By now, every single person in the mansion knew that his father was called “Boar Hunter Rodin” and had been lifted to commoner status in recognition of his contribution as the champion of his village. Everyone took Allen bringing back so many horned rabbits as him having inherited his hunting prowess from his champion father—hence Dudley’s coaxing him to catch big toads and now, Thomas’s demand for a white deer.

“That’s right! Hunt one for us!” Thomas had a carefree smile on his face as if he was making a perfectly normal request.

White deer were monsters that appeared only during wintertime. Because great boars provided more meat, Krena Village’s residents focused solely on them, shifting to hunting white deer only once boar season was over.

Hm, a white deer. It’s a Rank C monster, just like the great boar. My level’s gone up quite a bit these past few months. It might be interesting to give it a go.

“Understood, young master. I shall bring back a white deer.”

Everyone at the table had heard this exchange. However, they were all so astounded that in the end, no one thought to stop Allen.

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Three days later, it was New Year’s Day. It was another one of his days off, so Allen once again left the mansion early in the day, paying no mind to the snow accumulating on the ground. He was wearing straw-woven boots that he had borrowed the day before.

“You still going out today, lad? Be careful—the snow can get pretty thick some places. Hm? What’s with that?”

Allen, who had a large shovel tied to his back with rope, answered, “I thought I might need it today, so I borrowed it from the gardener.”

The shovel head was wider than thirty centimeters, so it did not fit inside Storage. The two ropes Allen used to secure it to his back had also been borrowed, this time from the stables. He had picked out seven thick and long ropes—the remaining five had gone into Storage.

After promising the guard to be careful, Allen passed through the gate and took off. Dozens of minutes of running through the snow later, he arrived at a spot with trees growing sparsely all around.

Should I hunt goblins in the morning? Hmm…on second thought, hunting the white deer will probably take some time. I should dedicate the entire day to hunting it, just in case. Come on out, Hawkins.

Six Bird E Summons appeared overhead.

I want you to look for a large deerlike monster with white fur. It's called a white deer. It has antlers longer than two meters on its head, so you should be able to spot it easily. You may go ten kilometers away max, but the closer, the better.

The hawks scattered in all directions.

All right, time for me to get to work too. Moleys, come out and Dig for me.

Four Beast G Summons in the form of moles appeared. In response to Allen's order, they worked together to push the snow back and dig one large hole.

Ever since learning the Summons had self-awareness, Allen had started making an effort to be much more precise when giving Hawkins instructions. Just now, in addition to the command to look for white deer, he had also told them to prioritize any adventurers in need of help they might find. He had even decided on signs with them, such as landing on a nearby tree branch and crying three times to signify an emergency.

Communication is always key when working with others.

The Summons had a will. In other words, they could very well refuse certain instructions.

But seriously, Summons that are self-aware and can stay out for thirty days without rest, huh? That's pretty nuts if you think about it objectively.

Back when he had been living in Krena Village, Allen had figured out that regardless of rank, all his Summons could remain Summoned for thirty days straight. They could continue functioning at top performance the entire time, not needing sleep or food. And now, he knew that they could move about of their own will. The realm of possibility had been blown wide open.

When Allen came back from his thoughts, he realized three Hawkins had returned.

Okay, is anyone's target within one kilometer?

None of the birds came down.

Two kilometers? Three kilometers? Four kilometers? Five kilometers?

Only when Allen reached five kilometers did one of the Bird E Summons react and slowly descend.

Well, five kilometers isn't too bad.

Because Moleys did not have very high Intelligence, they would stop listening to instructions once Allen got more than fifty meters away. In other words, he had to stay here to continue commanding them to use their Ability. Because of this, he decided to prioritize finishing the hole first. He waited patiently, occasionally using his shovel to gather the displaced dirt into one pile.

It ended up taking quite a bit of time to get the hole as deep as he wanted. During that time, he sent out Hawkins periodically to keep an eye on the target. Thankfully, it did not stray too far beyond the five kilometer mark.

As soon as the hole was finished, Allen obscured it with snow, then set off in the direction of the closest white deer. Thanks to his straw boots, he made good progress even while running on snow. Under the guidance of Hawkins, he soon came upon a monster that was busy feeding on horned rabbit carcasses.

Oh! There it is.

The white deer was slightly smaller than a great boar, but after adding in its neck and head, it still measured roughly three and a half meters in length. Its antlers, which grew out parallel to the ground, were at least two meters long. This was a monster that Allen had seen before back at Krena Village. However, because its white fur served as effective camouflage and this species was not very populous, the village only managed to capture one per winter month, if any at all.

Because the target was Rank C, Allen had prepared four Insect G Summons. He Summoned all of them while hiding behind a tree himself.

Hoppers, use Provoke.

The four frogs obediently started leaping up and down a distance away from the white deer, rapidly flashing various colors.

“NEEIIIGHHHHH!”

The instant the monster noticed the Summons, it promptly charged toward them, plowing through the snow. The Provoke had worked. The split second before they got trampled, Allen reverted the Hoppers into card form and then re-Summoned them a slight distance away, having them use Provoke again right off the bat. By repeating this process, he steadily lured the monster toward the hole he had prepared.

Along the way, Allen found himself impressed by how effective Provoke was. Although he was moving from tree to tree, his black outfit was still conspicuous here in this world of white. Even so, the white deer was so blinded by rage that it did not glance at Allen even for a split second.

Eventually, hunter and prey both reached the place of reckoning. One last time, Allen repositioned the Hoppers and had them use Provoke.

“NEEIIIGHHHHH!”

The white deer continued rushing straight ahead. Then all of a sudden, it disappeared from Allen’s sight.

Hmm, does Intelligence go down when Provoked? To be honest, my pitfall was actually pretty obvious.

Allen looked down into the pit that the white deer had fallen into. It was ten meters deep and two meters wide, but because the deer’s antlers were four meters across, the beast ended up being suspended in midair. Its head was the only thing left visible above ground level.

Before the monster managed to collapse the hole with its struggling, Allen drew his short sword and clambered onto its neck from behind. It bellowed loudly and desperately tried to throw him off, but because its feet were not touching ground, it could not muster any significant strength. Allen gripped his weapon tightly, then reached around and drove it straight

into the beast's neck. He repeated this until blood jetted out, indicating that he had pierced the jugular. The inside of the hole gradually filled with blood, painting a vivid mark of red in stark contrast with the whiteness of the world around them.

When the white deer finally stopped moving, Allen called out his grimoire and looked at the log on its front cover.

<You have defeated 1 white deer. You have earned 2,500 XP.>

Allen dispelled the grimoire and used all his strength to lift his prey back onto the ground. He then dragged it over to a large tree nearby, tied three ropes to each of its hind legs, threw the other ends of the ropes over a firm branch, and hoisted the beast up so that it was now hanging upside down. Gravity did the rest, causing blood to flow profusely from the open wound.

I've gotta drain every last bit of blood to make it that much lighter for when I lug it home. Well then, while that's going, I should get started with cleaning up.

All the displaced dirt from the ten-meter-deep hole went back in, filling it back up.

But damn the XP sure is crap.

Normally, Allen aimed to kill a hundred goblins each time he came out here, amounting to over 20,000 XP. In contrast, by the time the white deer was fully bled, it would already be time to head back. In short, he had spent the entire day and only had 2,500 XP to show for it.

But on the flip side, this one monster alone probably has more than five hundred kilograms of meat. Considering that meat is generally priced at one silver per kilo, that's five gold in total. I'm gonna make sure I get my due from Sebas.

It would have to be quite a tidy sum to make the day worth his while in exchange for all the XP he could have earned instead. He still had to buy a new weapon and armor, among many other things.

It was already past 4 p.m. by the time the beast was fully drained. Allen slowly lowered the huge carcass back to the ground, then tied its legs flat against its torso so that they would not get in the way on the walk back. He also tied the bulky shovel in together with it for convenience's sake.

During the wait, Allen had replaced all his Insect G cards with Beast E cards, bringing his Attack to over 300. He shouldered the white deer carcass and stood up with a heave.

Uh-oh, this is actually pretty heavy. I hope I don't throw out my back. Okay, time to head back to Granvelle City.

Although the monster had already lost all its blood, it still weighed more than eight hundred kilos. Because of Allen's short stature, the deer's hind legs still ended up dragging in the snow. Its long neck drooped over his shoulder, similarly dragging its long antlers on the ground. However, he

paid all of this no mind, forging ahead through the snow using sheer strength.

Oof, I sure hope I manage to get back before the sun sets.

Because Allen always ran back, he had no idea walking would take this long. He continued inching toward town as the setting sun stained the whiteness of the world madder red. When the city gate finally came into sight, he noticed there was a commotion going on.

“A white deer is coming!”

One of the guards seemed to be shouting at Allen. It was true that when viewed from the side, the white deer carcass completely obscured Allen’s figure. Consequently, it looked like the monster was slowly approaching with its head bowed.

The other guards milled about in a fluster. Allen could not see clearly, but he thought he spotted at least five of them. To curtail the possibility of being turned into an arrow pincushion, he shouted loudly while continuing to draw close.

“Good evening, Mr. Guard!”

“That voice... Is that you, lad?!”

“Yes, sir! May I go through please? I caught this white deer on the orders of House Granvelle.”

Allen continued plowing ahead. He felt someone approach, so he thrust out his crest from underneath the monster. That seemed to have done the trick, as he was allowed through with no further questioning in spite of what he was carrying.

On and on Allen went, now walking over the stone-paved streets of the city. Because the deer’s horns were too wide to pass through the back entrance, he circled around to the front of the mansion instead.

“Good evening!”

“I-Is that you, Allen?” The guard on gate duty was familiar enough with Allen to recognize him by his voice.

“Yes, sir. I’m sorry; the back entrance is too small to pass through. May I come in through the front?”

“R-Right, of course,” the guard replied in a slightly frightened voice.

All right, I gotta first report to Sebas, Allen thought as he continued making his way into the garden.

“AAAAAHHHHHHHHH!”

A lady-in-waiting who was looking out into the garden from a second-floor window screamed loudly. Her knees gave way and she pointed a trembling finger toward the window, prompting other servants to look out as well. The commotion grew larger and larger by the minute.

“A monster’s gotten onto the premise!”

“Gentlemen-in-waiting, grab your weapons! Someone, call the knights!”

Oh, that’s not good. They’re panicking.

Allen thought he would be able to explain the situation away, but the servants filing out of the mansion were starting to arm themselves. So, he dropped the white deer in a fluster so that they could see his figure clearly.

Booooooom.

The monster was so heavy that the moment it hit the ground, a tremor rumbled through the ground and blew snow away. Both those looking on from the second floor and those who had exited the mansion froze with shock, with some even falling on their rear ends. Most of them had never seen a monster up close in their life, and now a huge, white beast had seemingly walked into the grounds. The next thing they knew, however, it had transformed into Allen's form. Their minds scrambled to comprehend what they were seeing.

Ugh, that was really heavy. I guess my level is still a bit too low to carry something like that by myself.

Sebas pushed through the crowd to confirm the situation for himself. "I-Is that you, Allen?"

"Yes, sir, it's me. I've just returned. Young Master Thomas told me to hunt a white deer, so here it is." To avoid being held responsible for the commotion, Allen immediately brought out Thomas's name front and center to leave the impression that he was simply following orders.

The butler started when he recalled the exchange at dinner several nights ago. No one present had taken the conversation seriously, himself included. However, it was true that Allen had firmly declared that he would indeed bring a white deer back.

At almost sixty years of age, very little surprised Sebas anymore. However, ever since Allen came to the mansion, he felt as if the perception of normalcy that he had built up over his entire life was slowly but surely being eroded away. He struggled to remain upright despite feeling his common sense crumble internally.

"What is the commotion about?!" Baron Granvelle roared as he came outside. When he got a good view outside, however, his words died in his throat. "Th-That's a..."

"The hell y'all just standin' around for, eh?!" Dudley, the head chef, bellowed roughly while emerging from the first-floor kitchen. It was time for dinner, and yet no one had come to pick up the dishes. He had gotten tired of waiting and decided to come out himself. When he saw the beast on the ground, however, the look of irritation on his face immediately melted into one of delight. It was his first time seeing an entire white deer in person. He approached it all atremble. "A-A white deer!"

"Yes, Mr. Dudley," Allen replied. "I've only been able to bleed it. I haven't done anything else yet."

"I see! So you've done the bare minimum! Good! Now we need to remove its organs."

In the chef's eyes, this terrifying beast was merely another ingredient for his cutting board. This situation did not faze him in the slightest.

“VANS! What’re ya just standin’ around for?! Get yer ass over here! The rest of y’all, keep preparin’ for dinner!”

Dudley called his assistant Vans over and ordered someone to fetch a large butchering saw and a magical tool to provide illumination. He intended on doing the butchering right here, handling the task personally while leaving the rest of the preparations for dinner to the other chefs and servants.

“I’ll help, Mr. Dudley. Since the white deer is heavy.”

“Oh? Ya sure?”

“Of course, sir.”

Allen’s offer was not purely out of the kindness of his heart—he still had to retrieve the monster’s magic stone. He had similarly taken out the magic stones from all the horned rabbits that he had handed over so far. He was willing to part with the meat, as this was a promise with Thomas, but the magic stone was his. In the middle of following Dudley’s instructions to raise this leg, support this part, keep that part open, and everything else, he surreptitiously took out the magic stone and threw it into Storage.

As the gardener watched his carefully tended garden ruined with blood and viscera in dismay, Baron Granvelle turned to Sebas. “What is the meaning of this? Why didn’t you look into Allen’s background?!”

“What?! Master, you were the one who told me there was no need to dig any further after we learned he has no Talent and very low stats! As you commanded, I did not investigate any further!”

“Have you gone senile?! Look at that! An eight-year-old boy just brought back a Rank C monster by himself! How could he be Talentless?! I want to know every last detail about him!”

“O-Of course, Master. When the very next envoy from Krena Village arriv—”

The baron’s hawklike eyes narrowed.

“My apologies, Master. I will dispatch a man to Krena Village tomorrow.”

Sending someone to Krena Village took ten days round trip and to do so now would cost much more than usual due to all the snow. As the one managing the mansion’s finances, Sebas very much preferred conducting the investigation on the side of normal communications between the mansion and the village. It would not be long before the next shipment of great boar meat was due; when it arrived, he could simply ask the villager who was accompanying the delivery. However, that was apparently not enough for Baron Granvelle.

Cecil watched her father and the butler exchanging heated words with an exasperated face from a window on the second floor. Dinner was the last thing on everyone’s minds now.

Thomas, the one who had been the cause of all this, dashed out of the mansion. “IT’S A DEEEEEER!” he whooped. He tried to touch the monster, but his assigned maidservant desperately held him back.

Noticing his approach, Allen walked over and bowed respectfully. “Young Master Thomas, I have brought back a white deer as you asked.”

“Thank you!”

This incident was what prompted the baron to launch a full-scale investigation into Allen’s past.

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Despite working late into the night, Dudley and Allen were forced to suspend their work after only managing to skin the beast and remove its organs due to the sheer size of the white deer. Thankfully, it was currently winter, and the cold helped prevent the meat from spoiling so easily. They were to continue the following day.

Dudley had requested that Sebas excuse Allen from attending Cecil for the day so he could focus solely on the butchering, making the case that the boy had a deft hand and was a quick learner. Well, it had been more like a declaration, but that was just the head chef’s way of asking for things.

“You really are good at this, Allen. You should stop bein’ Young Miss’s manservant and be a chef instead. Want me to speak to Sebas for ya?”

Dudley still referred to Sebas without his title despite being lower in rank.

“Th-Thank you, sir, but Young Lady Cecil has been good to me so far.”

“We talkin’ about the same Young Lady?”

Being Cecil’s manservant was not easy, but it did come with opportunities to go out into town, plus free time during her lessons. These were way better terms than working as a chef.

“That aside, lad, you really pick things up quick. Vans takes ages to learn even the smallest things.”

Ah, that’s probably due to Intelligence.

Allen had noticed himself picking things up much faster as of late, and this applied to his work as a server as well. Every time he leveled up, the feeling became all the more obvious. The ease with which he could now remember things was beyond comparison to his life as Kenichi. He could memorize anything now, and his body would naturally move the way he wanted. That said, this did not mean he was getting cleverer. Just as before, he had to think hard for ideas. It was not the same as becoming a brilliant genius.

Man, the white deer sure was heavy yesterday. I guess Summoner is a support class in the first place.

Due to being a Summoner, Allen’s Intelligence stat was ranked at “S”—presumably the highest possible ranking—but his Attack was only a paltry “C.” As someone who threw iron balls and used a sword during fights, instead of having such lopsided stats, he would have preferred having all his stats ranked at “A” instead.

Allen’s hand moved deftly and surely even when he was deep in thought. In the end, that day’s butchering also lasted until quite late in the evening.

Once he returned indoors, he was told that Sebas wanted to see him in his room again.

I sure am getting summoned a lot lately, Allen thought as he knocked on the butler's door. "Excuse me, sir. It's me, Allen."

"Come in."

Allen walked in and was gestured toward the usual sofa.

"Sorry you had to work late yesterday even though it was your day off."

Oh? I actually got an apology.

"It was no problem at all, sir." After all, I hunted the white deer on my own volition, and I was helping out until late in the night because I wanted to get the magic stone. "May I ask why I was called today?"

"Before anything else, here you go." Sebas placed a heavy-looking pouch on the table between him and Allen.

"What is this, sir?"

"A hundred silver."

Huh? So I'm only getting a hundred silver for the white deer?

On top of having more than five hundred kilograms of edible meat, the beast's fur had remained largely undamaged and therefore should have been able to fetch a rather sizable sum. In short, the beast was worth way more than a hundred silver.

"That's your salary for the month."

WHAT?! My salary is fifty silver, which means I'm technically only getting fifty silver for the deer?! I sure as hell ain't doing that again! I pretty much just lost the entire off day! Talk about a crap deal!

A sigh naturally escaped Allen's mouth as a look of disappointment painted his face.

"Allen, you have a habit of letting your emotions show on your face. Don't misunderstand: that is your salary going forward."

"I'm sorry, sir?"

"You're diligent and take things seriously. However, that is not the reason we're raising your salary."

The full salary of a manservant was a hundred silver, but Allen could only receive half of the amount until he turned twelve. If this increase in salary was not a reward for his good work, then it could only mean...

"You want me to do something else for the extra fifty silver?"

"You do catch on quick. That's correct. We want you to also be a huntsman."

"What's a huntsman, sir?"

The role of "gamekeeper" from medieval English aristocratic society came to Allen's mind. Back then, the gamekeeper was in charge of rearing the game that his master would hunt as well as protecting the game population from being poached by the common people.

"You like hunting, do you not, Allen?"

Without missing a beat, Allen replied, "I love it, sir."

"A huntsman is..."

According to Sebas's explanation, in this world, a huntsman's main duties were also twofold: hunting monsters to bring back their meat and protecting people who were being assaulted by monsters outside of the city. A higher-tiered noble, such as a count, might have several huntsmen in his service, but the Granvelle family had never had one before.

"That sounds amazing!" Allen could not help but raise his voice in delight. In other words, he was being asked to be a noble's employed hunter.

"The other servants also strongly support this idea."

"Huh?"

After a brief conflicted moment, Sebas revealed that over the past few days, more than half the servants had knocked on his door begging him to let Allen do more hunting. Even before he had brought home the white deer, the way he consistently brought back five horned rabbits every time he had a day off was more than enough of a testament to his skill as a hunter.

It was true that the staff's meals improved a little in quality every time Allen came back with horned rabbits, but it was honestly only by a little. The more he was allowed to hunt, the more meat there would be to go around. Some people even went so far as to say that it would be much more beneficial for the household as a whole to redirect the time Allen spent looking after Cecil and doing odd jobs for her toward hunting instead. Sebas had found himself dogged by pretty much the same request again and again.

"And that is why we're offering you this position. To be frank with you, part of this is also due to the state of this house's budget. I confess I did not expect you to actually bring a white deer back, but it does help to illustrate my point."

Naturally, it would cost much less paying Allen fifty silvers extra each month instead of buying whatever monster he brought back at full price every time. Case in point, a single white deer normally went for several gold. House Granvelle's budget was extremely tight at the moment—this had been obvious from the moment it was mentioned that the coming New Year's Greeting would have to be significantly scaled down.

"Thank you for the explanation, sir. I will be glad to take on the role of huntsman for fifty silver extra each month. Do I start tomorrow?"

Honestly, if I get to go out every day, I don't even need the raise. As long as I bring five horned rabbits back, I can spend the rest of every day hunting goblins from morning to dusk! Oh no, I think I'm starting to drool.

Seeing Allen gleefully agree to the role, the butler said, "Just to make it clear, I'm asking you to 'also' be a huntsman."

"By which you mean...?"

"Naturally, you will still continue serving Young Lady Cecil and serving at dinner. Your work as a huntsman is only for one day each week."

"WHAT?!"

In other words, Allen's one day of hunting each week had only become two days.

"Are you dissatisfied? We can always pretend this conversation never happened."

"Wha—?! Please, no! I…I'll be happy to do it."

"Don't be so down, Allen. You learn things and improve quickly. If you continue serving Young Lady Cecil, you just might become a gentleman-in-waiting one day. You would want to keep your options open, yes?"

The path of promotion for a manservant was gentleman-in-waiting. Sebas, who could tell that Allen would much rather abandon his duties as a manservant to go hunting every day, was reminding him to take a more levelheaded and balanced perspective.

"Ugh…"

"So then, what do you think? Will you be willing to take on huntsman duties one day each week?"

"Y-Yes, sir. Thank you very much for considering my future."

Two months after beginning to serve at the Granvelle mansion, Allen ended up taking on three roles: manservant, server, and huntsman.

Chapter 4: First Meeting with Mihai

The year turned and it was now early March, when sunlight fell soft and gently across the land. Allen was currently riding in a carriage. Upon becoming a huntsman at the end of the previous year, he had received permission to go hunting two days every week. Thanks to this, he had made plenty of progress hunting goblins and was now Lvl. 19. He needed more XP than ever to level up, but he also had more time to hunt, so his leveling was still going rather smoothly.

The large New Year's event held at the start of the year for all the most influential people of the city had ended up being an extremely grand affair thanks to the white deer Allen had brought back. After that, he had continued hunting one white deer each month. Before, he had only been able to bring back horned rabbits, but things were entirely different now that he was officially a huntsman. He had the leeway to think about providing the house with a greater variety of meat, with white deer as one part of those considerations.

Last month, when he had returned with his third white deer, he found a large plank in the garden. The gardener firmly instructed him to place any game he was going to bring back on the plank from now on. Apparently it was tough work restoring the lawn from the tremor that generated each time Allen lowered a one-ton beast onto the ground. That, and because the garden kept getting drenched with blood and other viscera during the butchering process. Thus, the plank.

Now that it was March, the days were starting to warm back up, and edible monsters besides horned rabbits and white deer were starting to appear. Allen planned on looking for new targets among the newly awakened monsters starting this month.

"Allen, you aren't falling asleep on me, are you?!" Cecil suddenly said, kicking Allen's shin from her seat across from his.

Ow, that hurt. Looks like I fell asleep in the middle of thinking about what I'll hunt next time. I blame the warm sun. But wow, so people don't sleep while riding carriages in this world. Different land, different customs and all that, huh?

Clearly, Allen was not very aware of his identity as a manservant.

"My apologies, Young Lady Cecil."

"If you act like that in front of Mihai, I'm going to make you regret it!"

Cecil's crimson slanted eyes glared at Allen. The carriage they were riding was currently heading to the landing pad east of Granvelle City where a magic ship was scheduled to arrive from Academy City. Mihai, Baron Granvelle's eldest child, was riding on that ship, and Cecil was on her way to pick him up.

Allen sometimes found himself ordered to come along on Cecil's outings such as these. Shopping trips he could understand, as she needed an extra

pair of hands to carry her things, but there were some trips for which he honestly could not understand why she brought him along. Perhaps Cecil was at the age when she wanted to go around with an entourage.

Because the landing pad needed to accommodate magic ships that measured more than a hundred meters in length, the vast majority of the grounds were basically a flat, expansive area with nothing on it, just like the airports in Allen's previous life. After Cecil's party waited around for thirty minutes, a dot appeared in the sky, gradually growing in size.

"Wow!"

Eventually, the giant form of the magic ship roared over Allen's and Cecil's heads. After hovering a short while directly over the landing pad, it came straight down.

What an incredible sight. How is it flying? Lift? Magic?

The body of the vessel resembled a short, stout hamster that was hunched over. As Allen watched on in wonderment, what looked like a flight of stairs extended from the cabin at the bottom part of the magic ship.

It all looks so high tech. So, this world's actually quite technologically advanced.

Allen's everyday living conditions were closer to the standards of the undeveloped Middle Ages. In contrast, this incredible magic tool before his eyes looked so sophisticated it was practically an anachronism.

Cecil, who apparently adored her eldest brother, stood restlessly next to Allen as passengers slowly filed out of the magic ship. Soon enough, a boy with hair the same shade of purple as hers waved in their direction and started walking over, bulky luggage in hand. This was Mihai.

"Hey there, Cecil. How've you been?"

"W-Welcome back, Mihai! I've been doing wonderfully."

It's always great to see siblings getting along well with each other. Mihai started attending school last year, which means he must be thirteen or fourteen now. He's got a kind of mature vibe, though. Do children just grow up faster in this world?

Mash and Myulla came to Allen's mind as he watched the reunion between brother and sister. After the two finished greeting each other, they headed back to the carriage. Allen picked up all the luggage and got on after them.

"Hm? Are you the new servant?" Mihai asked.

"Yes, Young Master," Allen replied smoothly. "I have been blessed with the opportunity to serve House Granvelle as of last autumn. My name is Allen."

"Allen's my manservant," Cecil added.

"I see, so father has already given permission. Allen, as you said, this is an *opportunity*. Make the most of it."

"O-Of course, Young Master."

There was no way Allen could say no in this situation.

When Mihai mentioned their father giving permission, he was talking about how Baron Granvelle had allowed Cecil, who was still only eight, to have a personal servant. Her second brother, Thomas, was still being tended to by the common maidservants.

Allen had not asked, but Rickel had nevertheless told him about the relationship between man- and maidservants and the children of noble families. When he heard the details, Allen had thought it sounded like a nightmare.

When a noble child turned ten, he or she would gain a personal attendant—either of their own or their parents' choosing. This servant would normally be around twelve years old and serve the noble child for the rest of their lives, gradually gaining experience on the job. This was generally a good thing, as it meant they would be set for life. Once these servants turned fifteen, they would then be promoted to gentleman- or lady-in-waiting, with a possibility of eventually becoming even a butler or a knight further in the future.

Conversely, a man- or maidservant who did not get personally selected for service by a member of the noble family could not become a gentleman- or lady-in-waiting. In order to be chosen, lower servants would spend several years dedicating themselves to odd jobs, serving the noble family's children in hopes of earning the child's trust. Rickel, who had already turned eighteen, admitted that the opportunity had already passed him by.

A man- or maidservant who became a chef or stable hand could never become a gentleman- or lady-in-waiting. Basically, once someone entered a specialized trade, their only path of promotion would be within that line of work.

Allen, who had already been accepted as Cecil's personal manservant, was stuck having to serve Cecil for the rest of his life. As it turned out, he had unknowingly gotten onto an elevator he never should have. He had no idea how to get off, but he had to find a way somehow.

"Your name is Allen, right? Are you just that exceptional?" Mihai studied Allen with the same crimson eyes that Cecil possessed.

"I am here only because of Young Lady Cecil's magnanimity."

"I see."

"That's enough about Allen, right?" Cecil cut in as if vying for Mihai's attention.

"Ah, that's right, Cecil. I bought you souvenirs from the royal capital."

Mihai dug through his luggage to find a shiny hair clip in the shape of a butterfly and presented it to Cecil.

"Oh my! Thank you so much!"

Cecil delightedly accepted the gift with both hands, gazing at it with enchanted eyes while slowly changing the angle at which it reflected the sun.

"I'm glad you like it. I'm sorry I couldn't come back home during the summer holidays."

Ah, so the souvenir is also meant as a peace offering.

"That's right, you didn't come home! Didn't you say you have a long summer holiday and that you'd be able to rest all you wanted at home?"

"That's what I thought, but then I was told I had to clear a dungeon during the break or I'd be expelled."

He said "dungeon"! Clearing a dungeon is a must for staying in school?! That's incredible!

"Oh my! Please tell me all about it!" Cecil's eyes sparkled. She had always dreamed of attending the Academy.

According to Mihai, the summer holiday lasted all of August and September. Students were generally allowed to do whatever they wanted during that time, but it was a must to clear at least one of the many dungeons within Academy City. Mihai's teacher had even said, "If you can't clear a single one, this school doesn't need you. Go home." In those exact words.

"My! What an attitude to take! Is he allowed to do that?"

Mihai was the heir apparent of a baron family. And presumably, there were other students at the school who were children of even more important nobles. Cecil was astonished to hear the teacher sounding so blasé about expelling students of such high social standing.

"Of course. After all, it's a policy decided by the headmaster."

Apparently, Academy City had the authority and standing to ignore even the orders of the royal family. Allen recalled Baron Granvelle mentioning how the school would reject Krena's admission if she failed the entrance exam. Clearly this was a body with very high autonomy.

"That sounds like such an ordeal." Cecil was worried for Mihai upon hearing how strict life was at school.

"Well, the standards are high, but it also comes with great opportunities. Sword Lord Dverg visited my class once and gave me pointers in person!"

The memory made Mihai so happy that he unconsciously reached over to touch the sword he had taken off and propped up by his side.

Hey, I recognize that name. I see, so Sword Lord Dverg teaches at Academy City.

Mihai continued to tell stories about his life at school, his eyes shining excitedly. He had seemed rather mature earlier on, but once he got talking, he reverted to being a normal boy his age. He and Cecil talked nonstop until the carriage reached home.

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By mid-March, monsters started to get active, many of which were actually edible. On the first day of hunting since Mihai's return, Allen managed to finish his quota of a hundred goblins by three in the afternoon. On his way back, he had two sticks on his left shoulder—one strung with five horned rabbits, the other with the big toad that Dudley had asked for.

I've got my horned rabbits and big toad. Hawkins, there should be birds running on the ground called rowdy chicken nearby. Find me the closest one; I don't mind if it's a whole flock.

Allen was not one to waste even the time on the return journey. After he gave his instructions, four Bird Es—he had recently reduced the number he employed for scouting from six to four—flew off.

Wow, you already found some?

One Hawkins found a rowdy chicken soon after. Allen took off while still shouldering the prey he had already caught. Less than a kilometer away, he did indeed happen upon a super muscular chicken strutting on the ground.

Take this!

After lowering his luggage to the ground, Allen threw an iron ball with all his might. The monster took the ball to the head and fell dead on the spot. Now that he was Lvl. 19, he could kill the large majority of Rank D monsters with a single attack.

Hm, this should be enough for today. Is it about time to consider hunting further in?

Allen slit the chicken's neck with his short sword. While waiting for it to bleed out, he sat in thought. According to what he had heard, lots of Rank C monsters lived close to the White Dragon Mountains. Naturally, they yielded more XP than Rank D monsters did.

But it'd be a waste of magic stones if my Tamas keep getting done in. And I'm already hunting in an area mainly occupied by Rank D monsters.

Allen killed the beasts he brought back for food using his iron balls, but naturally called on his Beast E Summons to kill goblins and other inedible monsters. It was much faster and more efficient doing it this way, as he could Summon them anywhere he wanted within a fifty-meter radius.

You know what? I'll first focus on leveling Strengthening up. Then I'll try challenging myself against Rank C monsters.

Back when he lived in Krena Village and had very limited opportunity to hunt, he had raised all three skills related to Summoning at an equal rate. That was the fastest way to get Summoning up and unlock new Summons that would give him greater stat buffs.

Now, however, the amount of Skill XP he needed to continue leveling Summoning up was simply astronomical. In contrast, it was much easier to raise his own level, which had remained relatively untouched until recently. By prioritizing the Strengthening skill, he could use his Summons to hunt monsters with greater efficiency.

Currently, Rank E Summons were so weak they could be killed even by goblins. If Allen went deep enough to where Rank C monsters roamed, he would definitely end up burning through his Rank E magic stones. After deciding to first reach Strengthening Lvl. 5 before going looking for Rank C monsters, Allen checked on the rowdy chicken and found it completely drained. He then ran back to Granvelle City with three poles bearing his catches over his shoulder.

Until a while ago, the jaws of the guards on duty would drop when they saw Allen approaching the gate with so many monsters on his back. Now, however, they had grown completely used to it and allowed him to pass straight through. He made good progress through the nobles' residence quarter, heading for the Granvelle mansion. Because of how narrow the mansion's rear entrance was, he would enter from the front whenever he had a large catch. Today was one of those days. Cecil had told him to bring a lot back to celebrate Mihai's return because she loved her eldest brother very much.

Heeding the gardener's instructions, Allen lowered his catches onto the designated plank in the garden.

Clang! Clang!

Suddenly, Allen's ears registered the sound of swords clashing. He looked up and saw Mihai and the knight captain sparring, with the baron, baroness, Thomas, and Cecil all watching on. Apparently, everyone was here to see how much stronger Mihai had grown in his time away. As Allen continued watching, memories of his time playing knight with Krena surfaced within his mind. He was so captured by the sight that he forgot to go tell Dudley he was back.

Wow, Mihai's pretty strong! And this is my first time seeing Zenof in action.

"All right, this will do. Young Master Mihai, you have truly improved."

Mihai looked quite happy with the praise. "Thank you, Captain Zenof. That said, aren't I old enough to not be called 'Young Master' anymore?"

All the spectators burst into laughter.

It was now past 5 p.m., the time of the day when the kitchen was the busiest. Dudley always told Allen to come back earlier, but every time, he could only smile and vaguely promise to "do his best." Because Allen had to meet his goblin-hunting quota, he always ended up returning at around this time.

"Oh, you're back, Allen! Incredible, you brought back so much today!"

Cecil, who noticed Allen with his catches at the butchering area in the garden, called out to him. He looked in her direction, inadvertently thinking about how long it was since she last praised him. Everyone else also directed their attention toward him.

"I have just returned, milady," Allen replied with a brief bow before turning to head indoors. He had to fetch Dudley so that they could butcher the game he had brought back.

Mihai looked at the carcasses on the ground, then at Allen directly. "I'm impressed, Allen. That's quite the catch. Would you be interested in a round with me?"

What? Me?

As Allen stood in place, unsure how to answer, Zenof held out his own sword in an obvious prompt for him to accept Mihai's offer.

Wow, a mithril sword! I guess that's a knight captain for you! This looks awesome. Oh, right, the match. My card distribution is geared for hunting right now. Would it do?

Just in case, Allen double-checked his current Status.

Name: Allen
Age: 8
Class: Summoner
Level: 20
HP: 412 (515) + 130
MP: 30 (780) + 200
Attack: 220 (276) + 130
Endurance: 220 (276) + 20
Agility: 415 (519) + 60
Intelligence: 600 (750) + 40
Luck: 415 (519) + 200
Skills: Summoning {4}, Creation {4}, Synthesis {4}, Strengthening {4}, Expansion {3}, Storage, Deletion, Sword Mastery {3}, Throwing {3}
XP: 126,470/200,000
Skill LevelsSummoning: 4
Creation: 4
Synthesis: 4
Strengthening: 4
Skill ExperienceCreation: 94,730/1,000,000
Synthesis: 96,610/1,000,000
Strengthening: 310,560/1,000,000
Creatable SummonsInsect: E, F, G, H
Beast: E, F, G,
Bird: E, F, G
Grass: E, F
Stone: E
HolderInsect: F x 2, E x 1
Beast: E x 13
Bird: E x 4
Grass: E x 20
Stone:

Allen took his short sword off his waist and propped it against a nearby wall so that it would not get in his way. Ever since having officially become

a huntsman, he had been allowed to walk around armed and therefore had reverted to wearing his weapon around everywhere instead of keeping it inside Storage. He tightened his grip on Zenof's mithril sword and walked up to stand across from Mihai a slight distance away.

As everyone looked on, the baroness clasped her hands before her chest and exclaimed, "Oh my, what if Mihai gets hurt?" Her son was facing someone who had managed to bring a Rank C monster back alone. Her worries were understandable.

Instead of answering her, however, Zenof simply said, "Both sides, ready?"

Allen and Mihai both lifted their weapons.

"FIGHT!"

Allen, whose Agility was over 400, immediately closed in on Mihai. A loud clang rang out as both swords clashed.

Huh? Wait, he's... He's actually pretty strong! Seriously?!

Allen noticed that something was off almost immediately. Mihai's strikes were actually heavy, and he also had the upper hand in speed. Realizing that he did not need to go easy on his opponent, Allen grabbed his sword with both hands in order to bring it down with every last drop of his 370 Attack.

Dammit, he blocked me with a single hand?!

Mihai looked unfazed while blocking Allen's full-powered swing. After this, Allen remained on the back foot.

"Madam, please rest assured," Zenof suddenly said, addressing the baroness.

"About what?"

"In less than a year, Young Master Mihai cleared the assignment that Academy City assigns all students. It is simply impossible for him to lose against someone who has yet to attend."

The moment Zenof made his declaration, Allen's sword was smacked out of his hand and he found the tip of Mihai's sword at his throat.

“I surrender,” Allen admitted, prompting Mihai to withdraw and sheathe his weapon.

“You really are incredible, Allen,” Mihai smiled. “Now I understand why you were made personal manservant despite your age.”

“And yet I fall far short in comparison to you, Young Master. Thank you very much for the favor of this match.” Allen bowed deeply.

I mean, damn, he’s really strong. I couldn’t lift a finger. Hm, is this because he cleared a dungeon for his summer break assignment? That must have helped him level up a lot. So this is the strength of someone with a Talent who properly got his level up. And he did this in a year—rather, it might have been only in the two months he went dungeon delving.

Those under Normal Mode leveled up a hundred times faster than those in Hell Mode. In spite of all the hunting he had done, Allen was still no match for Mihai.

“No less from Cecil’s personal manservant. Make sure you take care of my sister, Allen.”

“Y-Yes, Young Master.”

Mihai offered a handshake, and Allen accepted it. In this way, Allen’s very first fight with a Talented person in Normal Mode ended with his complete defeat.

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Spring break ended along with the month of March, and it was now early April. Mihai had boarded a magic ship and headed back to Academy City.

Allen valued the match with him very much, as it allowed him to directly experience the difference in growth between Normal Mode and Hell Mode. In light of that, Allen had asked him for another match when he came home again next spring. He thought these fights could serve as a regular way to confirm his own strength.

“Good morning, Mr. Rickel.”

“Good morning to you too.”

As always, Allen had woken up, groomed himself, and gone down to the servants’ dining hall. He grabbed the seat across from Rickel, the head manservant, and greeted him. Almost half a year had passed since Allen came to work at the Granvelle mansion, and there was a marked difference from back then: a meat dish was now added to everyone’s breakfast in addition to the previous menu of only soup and bread. The extra dish even used different meat from what was inside the soup. After becoming a huntsman at the end of the previous year, Allen had started bringing back meat two days each week without fail. Thanks to his efforts, the diet of everyone in the mansion, from the baron’s family all the way to the lowest servant, had seen drastic improvement. Seeing young Thomas heartily chow down always brought a warm smile to Allen’s face, due to his previous life as a thirty-five-year-old man.

Rickel suddenly said, “Keep your wits about you tonight, Allen.”

“Are you referring to Viscount Carnel coming for dinner?”

“That’s right. Can’t imagine what our neighbor is coming over for, but it can’t be for anything good. Don’t treat him too well—do only your minimum best when serving him.”

The Granvelle house had been told that the viscount was coming only a few days ago. In the scheme of how nobles usually went about these things, this was considered very short notice.

Up till now, Allen had had the opportunity to interact with a large number of guests through his work as a server. The vast majority of them had been influential people here in Granvelle City, such as the local guildmasters of the Adventurer’s and Merchant’s Guilds and the owner of a high-class inn. Once in a while, this would even be nobles coming over from the royal capital. Thanks to the magic ships, travel between Granvelle City and the royal capital turned out to be much easier than Allen had previously imagined.

“He even made a magic ship wait for him.”

Of course, there were other routes besides the Granvelle City-royal capital one. There was one connecting the royal capital with the capital of the Carnel fiefdom too, which was located right next to the Granvelle fiefdom, separated by the White Dragon Mountains. And of course, there were established flights connecting fiefdom capitals with each other. According to Rickel, Viscount Carnel had adjusted the schedule of a ship on the royal capital-Carnel City route for the sake of his own return this time. Then he got onto a Granvelle-Carnel magic ship, which needed to make a large detour to the north to circumvent the northern edge of the mountain range.

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Viscount Carnel arrived in the afternoon. After the viscount was guided to the dining hall on the second floor, Allen moved into position to serve him. The viscount was in his late thirties and had a long face with a rather wide forehead. He gave off a dazzling impression, but this was not because of his forehead—rather, it was because he was wearing a sparkly, ostentatious outfit. Someone who appeared to be his butler was standing behind his seat. Whereas at least one or two other members of the baron’s family would usually be in attendance whenever a guest came, the baron was alone this time.

“Welcome, Viscount Carnel. I heard you went to a lot of trouble for this visit.”

Although Baron Granvelle’s voice was warm, his smile did not reach his eyes. The two men were sitting at opposite ends of a rather long table.

“Oh, it’s nothing you need worry about. My capital’s always so clamorous, probably because it’s thriving so much! Coming to a place like this every once in a while does me good.”

“Is that so! I’m glad to hear it. Ha ha ha!”

The baron chose to let the viscount’s sarcasm slide.

If I remember correctly, these two families have been at odds for generations now.

Allen continued serving, making sure not to meet Viscount Carnel's eyes. He had heard that one large reason these two neighboring realms were so antagonistic to each other was the White Dragon Mountains Range that separated them. There were veins of mithril deposits in the mountains, and both realms held the mining rights for their own side. The ore was bountiful on both sides; however, because the white dragon currently resided on the baron's side, only the viscount could mine the mithril. Carnel was flourishing thanks to this mining while Granvelle was barely scraping by with agriculture.

However, that was only the current state of affairs. This relationship between the two fiefdoms would flip every so often, as the white dragon would move to the other side every one or two hundred years. This very thing had occurred over a century ago; back then, it was Granvelle that prospered from mining mithril. Even now, there were four mines on the baron's side of the White Dragon Mountains that were supposed to still look the way they did back then.

Because of the white dragon's capricious movements, the Granvelle and Carnel families were constantly in a state where one side envied the other. According to Rickel, the current generation viscount had a particularly nasty personality and constantly sought out ways to harass Baron Granvelle.

Allen carried a dish of horned rabbit to Viscount Carnel. The kitchen now had much better meat available, which meant the horned rabbit had been someone's conscious choice.

"Hm? Is this great boar meat?"

The baron's face twitched once before he replied vaguely, "Well, we do have skilled hunters in our realm."

"Ah, I was correct!" Viscount Carnel smirked. "So this is the meat that you were concealing."

"Wh—?! I have no idea what you are talking about. I have concealed nothing."

I can see the baron's doing his best to rein in his anger. It was this viscount's fault that we ended up having to hunt more great boars, right?

Before the viscount's arrival, Allen had heard quite a lot about him from Rickel. Supposedly, during an audience with the king, Viscount Carnel had reported, "There is a fiefdom with gains that it is not reporting." When the king asked which one it was, Viscount Carnel had pointed the finger at Baron Granvelle and said, "Despite his realm regularly producing a large amount of great boar meat, Lord Granvelle has yet to report this to the royal family. He is concealing his profits, which counts as an act of treason!" The baron, who had indeed been amiss in reporting the great boars, was left in a very precarious position during the audience.

Allen recalled how the baron had been shaking with rage from the memory during the feast held in his honor at Krena Village.

“So, what is the reason for your visit today?” the baron asked in an effort to hurry the conversation so that he could kick the other man out as soon as possible.

“Oh right! This boar meat is so delicious I totally forgot! Ha ha ha!”

“I’m glad to hear it. Well? Why are you here?”

The baron once again refused to rise to the provocative sarcasm.

“I came here to tell you that my youngest daughter just underwent her Appraisal Ceremony the other day and was confirmed to be Talentless.”

“What?”

Oh right, the Ceremony takes place in April. We had it in mid-April in Krena Village, but I guess nobles have theirs slightly earlier? Which means, in less than ten days, Mash will also get Appraised. Aww, I really wanted to be there for him and see what he gets. Should I send a letter to ask? Oh wait, no, my parents don’t know how to read and write.

Every year in April, all children who had reached five years of age within the past year—everyone from royalty to serfs—had to undergo the Appraisal Ceremony. Viscount Carnel bringing it up prompted Allen to remember his younger brother Mash, who was also supposed to take it this year.

I see, so the viscount’s daughter is Talentless. Hold on. But he sounded happy about it.

“I see,” the baron said simply with a disinterested “So what?” look.

“Another one of my children turned out to have a Talent, so I was worried for my youngest daughter. But it turns out that she’s Talentless! What a relief, eh?”

“Good for you.”

The baron’s face was growing increasingly fierce, his eyes looking more and more like those of a hawk’s.

“My heart goes out to you, Lord Granvelle. You have three children and two of them have Talents.”

The viscount was clearly referring to Mihai, who was currently in Academy City, and Cecil, who was a Wizardess.

“Well, all they have to do is fulfill their noble duty!” Anger finally crept into the baron’s voice.

What’s going on? Us serfs and commoners are super happy about having Talents, but it’s a bad thing for nobles? What’s that about fulfilling a “noble duty”? Is there something they have to do? Or is the Academy’s tuition really high? Nobles really are different from commoners and serfs. How strange.

The moment it was announced that Dogora had the Ax User Talent, his father had immediately bear-hugged him out of sheer joy. The same had been true of Pelomas and his father Deboji. Rodin had also strongly wished for Allen to have a Talent. In contrast, Viscount Carnel had gone to the trouble of riding a magic ship to come all the way here just to brag about his child being Talentless. Clearly, nobles and non-nobles viewed Talents in very different ways.

In the end, that really was the only thing Viscount Carnel wanted to say. He soon left in very high spirits.

Chapter 5: Rank C Monsters

It was now the end of September, about half a year since Viscount Carnel's visit. Today was Allen's day off. He would normally be busy chasing monsters outside the city at this time, but today was different. Today, he was going to use the money he had saved up over ten months to buy something.

At the end of April, Sebas had called Allen to his room and told him that Mash had been pronounced a Spear User at his Appraisal Ceremony. Whereas the viscount had been glad that his daughter had been Talentless, Allen was over the moon hearing that his younger brother had a Talent. Apparently, the butler had asked the envoy from Krena Village to convey the message that Allen was doing well in Granvelle City when he returned home. When Allen heard this, he had thanked Sebas from the bottom of his heart.

Now, just as Allen was heading to the square in the middle of the city, he heard someone calling out to him.

"Hey there! Fancy bumping into you!"

"Ah, good morning, mister."

It turned out to be a merchant that Allen had saved outside of town before. Nowadays, whenever Allen walked around the city, he would get recognized every now and again.

"Thank you again for saving my life back then."

"I'm simply relieved to see you healthy and well, mister."

The man lowered his head deeply. Naturally, a full-grown adult bowing to a child in the middle of the street drew attention.

After becoming a huntsman, Allen had saved quite a few merchants and travelers. The monsters grew active in spring; as a result, adventurers also grew more active. Allen had ended up saving a fair number of those adventurers too. About once a month, Hawkins found someone needing help.

Protecting the citizens from monsters was also a part of Allen's duties as huntsman. Because of this, he became quite proactive in saving whomever he could. He even used Leaves of Life on anyone who needed it—hiding the appearance behind his hand, of course. Each leaf cost five Rank E magic stones, but he never thought using them was a waste.

"Hey, there you are, Allen."

After Allen parted ways with the merchant, he got hailed once again. When he turned around, he saw a male adventurer with a sword on his waist, flanked on both sides by female adventurers. These were the people Allen had actually made plans to meet up with.

"Good morning, Mr. Raven, Ms. Rita, Ms. Milci."

"All right, first order of business: food!"

"Lead the way, Mr. Raven."

Allen promptly accepted Raven's offer for lunch, and the group walked into a restaurant located along a major avenue.

Thinking about it, this is my very first time eating in a restaurant in town.

So far, Allen had done almost nothing else other than work or hunt during his waking moments. Naturally, that included strolling around town. Even though it had been almost a full year since he came to this city, there were plenty of stores that he did not know and places that he had never been to.

"Here ya go. You still collecting these, right?"

While waiting for the food, Raven handed Allen a jute pouch.

"Again? Are you sure about this?"

"'Course."

It was filled with Rank E magic stones. Every time the two met, Raven gave Allen another pouch of exactly a hundred, so it was most likely the same number again this time. With this, Allen had now received five hundred in total. Thanks to Raven, he now had a rather sizable stock.

It was a little while ago that Raven had found out about Allen being someone from the Granvelle family after another adventurer that Allen had saved told him. Even so, Raven and Allen still met up casually whenever they had something to do together.

"So, why'd you call me?"

Allen had actually not yet told Raven why they were meeting up today. Several days ago, Allen had visited Raven's inn but was told that he was out, and so asked reception to pass on the request to meet at the city's central plaza today.

"I'm thinking of moving my hunting grounds a bit farther in. So I want to ask you about the characteristics of Rank C monsters in the area, including things like whether they roam in groups or not."

"What?!"

As all three in Raven's group widened their eyes in shock, a delicious-looking meat dish arrived. It probably cost several silver.

"You…understand what you're saying, right? Even Rank C adventurers like us would die if we get unlucky."

"That's why I'm asking you to tell me what you can about the monsters."

The last time they had met, Raven had told Allen that adventurers had ranks. Just like monsters, the ranking started at "E" and reached all the way to "S." However, that did not mean an adventurer would be able to fight on equal footing with a monster of the same rank—in general, the adventurer would struggle in such a fight. Allen had asked for this information just in case, even though he was in no hurry for it, as he was considering eventually quitting his job as manservant and switching to being an adventurer.

As they continued eating, Raven revealed that he and his two companions were all Rank C adventurers. Then he told a story of how they

had gotten attacked by armored ants, Rank C monsters that were dangerous due to their proclivity to travel in swarms.

However, Allen had already made up his mind about hunting where Rank C monsters roamed. Over lunch, he asked Raven all the questions about Rank C monsters that came to mind, taking detailed notes in his grimoire. There were plenty of reasons for his decision.

- He had wiped out almost all of the goblins.
- His level was now so high that it was difficult to level up on goblins alone.
- When he turned nine years old next month, the multiplier on his stats would go up again (from 0.8 to 0.9).
- He now had a large enough stock of Rank E magic stones that he would not have to worry about actively collecting more for a while.
- Strengthening had reached Lvl. 5.

Not long ago, Zenof had, over dinner, reported that the number of assault cases by goblins had more than halved over the past six months. In the vicinity between Granvelle City and the White Dragon Mountains, Allen had killed more than ten thousand of them over the span of roughly nine months. Due to this, their population had plummeted, and it was now taking longer to find them. Allen now had more Rank D magic stones than he knew what to do with, so it was about time to move on and challenge the next rank up.

After lunch, Allen went to do some shopping. For the first time after becoming a huntsman, he was finally going to buy equipment for himself. He asked Raven's group to accompany him and give their opinion, so the four of them walked into a store together.

"Welcome," the storekeeper said. He gave the group a funny look for bringing a child to an armorer's, but they ignored it and went straight to checking out what was on offer.

"So, what're you looking for?" Raven asked.

"Hmm… Something that won't obstruct my movement."

Raven recalled how, the first time they met, Allen had taken off so quickly he seemed to have disappeared. "Then you probably shouldn't get armor. Look for something that's light and tough."

Rita suddenly interrupted Raven and Allen's conversation, holding out a pair of shorts that she had picked up. "I think these would look great on you, Allen! Right, Milci?"

"Um…yeah."

Rita held the pants against Allen, checking the size. She was acting like an aunt choosing clothes for her nephew.

Hm, reminds me of a uniform from kindergarten or elementary school, the ones where the students have to wear shorts even in winter.

Many of the online computer games Allen had played as Kenichi had options for characters to wear special costumes, but he had never even given them a single glance. All he needed for his armor was defense value and resistance against magic and debuffs. If the most powerful set of equipment ever was a onesie, he would have put it on without hesitation.

In this life, however, things were different. If Allen was to continue his style of hunting while staying on the move, he had to prioritize speed and ease of movement rather than defensibility in order to truly min-max his grinding. The only thing that remained the same was that he valued performance over appearance. This was a motto that had not changed since his time as Kenichi.

"How much is it?" Allen asked, checking out the price of the shorts and the effects it came with.

"Uh, two gold."

The reason for the slightly higher price tag was because this pair of shorts was made with materials and fur from a monster.

"I want something that would be easy to move in, like these shorts, but I'm willing to go up to around five gold. Is there anything better?"

Allen was prepared to spend more than half of his savings today.

Rita whistled. "Someone's rolling in cash!"

"Then you'd probably want either of these," Raven said, picking out two options.

Death Spider mantle: 5 gold
Breath Damage Resistance (Minor), Increased Elemental Damage Resistance (Medium)
Light brown in color

White Bat hood: 6 gold
Breath Damage Resistance (Medium)
White in color

Hm, so these are the only ones in my price range. "Rank C monsters don't use breath attacks, right?" Allen asked, recalling what Raven had said in the restaurant just now.

"At the very least, none of the monster species you'll encounter on the way to the White Dragon Mountains use it. I would recommend going for the mantle, partly because it'd be handy both when you feel cold and when you camp out."

That's really specific and useful advice. As expected of a veteran adventurer. So, there are things I need to consider aside from the resistances alone. I should take his suggestion.

"I'll go with the mantle, then."

With this, Allen was done with his preparations for taking on Rank C monsters.

□□□

October rolled around, and Allen turned nine. As always, he was waiting in front of the city gates by six in the morning. Today, he was wearing the mantle he had just bought at the armorer's. He had asked for its length to be adjusted, so there was no worry of him tripping over it.

"Hey there, lad! Nice mantle you're wearing!"

"Thank you, sir. I bought it the other day."

The guard and Allen, whose relationship went all the way back to November of the previous year, chatted the way they always did.

This mantle really was a good choice. I like how easily I can put it on, and it keeps my hands free.

Allen gave his arms a shake, confirming that he could move normally.

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!

The gates opened with the ringing of the bell, allowing Allen to run through. Whereas he used to hunt roughly a day's walk away, his plan today was to go three days' walk away.

Good, the mantle's not getting in my way even when I run. Now, I didn't get to buy a new weapon, but how would this go?

After visiting the armorer's, Allen had also dropped by a weapons store. However, the sword that caught his eye was too expensive for him at the moment. He was the kind of person who would rather wait to buy what he actually wanted instead of compromising and buying something inferior. However, he was open to considering getting a new weapon if his Summons, short sword, and iron balls proved ineffective today.

Sebas had told him, "This month marks your one-year anniversary of joining our family. It's a bit early, but we'll be raising your salary as a manservant to the normal value for an adult, one gold." Together with his salary as a huntsman, Allen now earned one gold and fifty silver every month.

Allen's first thought when hearing this was, "It's already been a year? Time sure flies." He wondered if the hunting party in Krena Village had already begun this year's hunts and thought about his family and Krena.

While running, Allen got out his grimoire to look at his stats, which had gone up again on his birthday, October 1. He never got tired of looking at his Status. He thought he could probably just stare at it for three hours straight. Five whenever his stats went up.

```
Name: Allen
Age: 9
Class: Summoner
Level: 24
HP: 553 (615) + 140
MP: 846 (940) + 200
Attack: 298 (332) + 140
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Endurance: 298 (332) + 20
Agility: 560 (623) + 60
Intelligence: 855 (950) + 40
Luck: 560 (623) + 200
Skills: Summoning {4}, Creation {4}, Synthesis {4}, Strengthening {5}, Expansion {3}, Storage, Deletion, Sword Mastery {3}, Throwing {3}
XP: 194,810/600,000
Skill LevelsSummoning: 4
Creation: 4
Synthesis: 4
Strengthening: 5
Skill ExperienceCreation: 291,700/1,000,000
Synthesis: 281,640/1,000,000
Strengthening: 200/10,000,000
Creatable SummonsInsect: E, F, G, H
Beast: E, F, G, H
Bird: E, F, G
Grass: E, F
Stone: E
HolderInsect: E x 2
Beast: E x 14
Bird: E x 4
Grass: E x 20
Stone:

Up until now, in order to maximize his Skill XP, Allen had always spent almost all his MP, leaving only around 30, in the morning before heading out to hunt goblins. Today, however, he had not done so, leaving himself in perfect condition—after all, he had no idea what would happen. After confirming how much MP he would actually use fighting Rank C monsters, he would then gradually lower the amount he left available in the coming weeks.

Now that Strengthening had reached Lvl. 5, it buffed the Summons by +200 in the same two stats they boosted for Allen. It had been +100 in the previous level, which meant the effect had been doubled. This was one of the reasons why Allen decided to attempt challenging Rank C monsters.

Several hours of running later, Allen looked around to confirm whether he had reached where he wanted.

I've been running for a while now. Is this place right? Hawkins, come on out.

Four Bird Es appeared overhead, crying, “Piiii!” in unison.

Umm…there should be large ants covered in round armor called armored ants, and some piglike figures walking on two legs called orcs around here. Search as far as ten kilometers in all four directions. If you can’t find any, go further. Find me one of either kind wandering around alone by itself.

The four Summons cried out once more, then scattered.

Allen’s targets for today were monsters that Raven had told him about the other day: the armored ant and the orc. There were plenty of other Rank C monsters—such as the death spider—but they were much harder to find, being significantly rarer, and much more troublesome to kill, as they used special abilities like poison and paralyzing agents.

Armored ants and orcs supposedly often roamed in groups of two to three. Allen’s instruction, however, was to look for ones that were by themselves. This seemed to be a rather strict requirement, seeing as how no Hawkins was back even after thirty minutes.

I guess it really is hard to find ones that are alone. I’ve been waiting quite a while, even though the Bird Es should be much faster than before thanks to Strengthening.

Eventually, as Allen was in the middle of his thoughts, one Hawkins finally came back. It had apparently discovered an armored ant ten kilometers away. Allen ran in the direction it indicated until he found a three-meter-tall monster with what looked like the head of an ant and the body of a pillbug.

I had expected it to be protected by a round shell—I guess “armor” would be a more fitting name?—but this was not what I had imagined. The only ant-like part is its head? I should definitely avoid the pincers. So this is the kind of monster Raven was talking about in his story.

Whereas the pincers on the monster’s jaw did indeed look very vicious, its body looked like a very sturdy salad bowl flipped over.

Now, how am I supposed to kill this thing? Its head is the only part not protected by its armor. Well, let’s start off siccing all my Tamas on it. Tamas, go!

In response to Allen’s command, fourteen saber-toothed cats appeared, surrounded the armored ant, then spammed their Ability, Claw.

They’re barely even scratching the armor. None of the attacks are getting through the head either, which means it must also be pretty tough.

Allen analyzed the fight from behind a tree. Apparently the Tamas could not harm even the monster’s sole unprotected part. The sound of claws scratching hard surfaces filled the air.

The armored ant was hardly just taking all the attacks idly. It snapped its pincers, which were more than a meter each in length, to counterattack. The Beast Es could not withstand these attacks and gradually dwindled in number. Every time that happened, Allen used his magic stones and MP to

create a new one and called it out, but he soon determined this strategy to be ineffective.

All right, I gotta take another approach. Agehas, come out! Use Scale Powder.

Leaving the Beast Es to continue their attack, Allen added two Insect Es to the fight—he needed two for their Ability to be effective on a Rank C monster. These one-meter-tall butterflies flapped their wings, covering the armored ant's head with their yellow powder. The head immediately drooped and became motionless. The monster had fallen asleep.

Nice, so it works on Rank C monsters too! Insect E's Ability really is useful.

Allen walked up to the armored ant—giving the pincers a wide berth—and circled it to get a comprehensive look.

Hmm, there are a ton of scratches left by the Tamas' attacks, but it's all just surface level.

The conclusion that Allen arrived at after careful examination was that Tama really was inappropriate for killing armored ants.

Well, let's kill this monster before it wakes up.

Allen reached down low, right where the armor barely scraped the ground. Then, with a "Hngh!" he flipped the armored ant onto its back.

That was heavy, but not as much as I'd imagined. Since this is an insect, I bet it's all empty inside. Makes sense that armor made out of this is light.

According to Raven, the armor of an armored ant, due to being extremely sturdy and light, was very highly prized and used in many adventurers' armor.

Allen carefully climbed over the side of the overturned shell, making sure he did not lose his balance. It turned out the rest of the monster's body inside the shell looked like that of a normal ant, just writ large. There were six legs growing from its torso and it had a short and stout abdomen.

Without further ado, Allen scrambled to the torso and brought his sword down on the joint where the monster's head and torso were connected, figuring this was the softest part of its body. To his surprise, however, all the strength that he plunged down with bounced right back up. A short sword worth fifty silver was apparently insufficient for harming the body of an armored ant.

Damn, that's tough! If I keep this up, I'll chip this sword that Dogora gave me. It's just not sturdy nor sharp enou— Ah, it woke up.

The ant seemed to have woken up from Allen's attack. It started flailing its barbed legs furiously. Allen continued cutting away at the joint he thought was a weak point while taking care that none of the legs got him.

More than ten minutes later, the short sword finally stabbed deep and the monster's previously frenzied flailing slowed down until it stopped altogether.

<You have defeated 1 armored ant. You have earned 3,000 XP.>

It's finally dead. Yep, this monster is a total nope. Killing it takes way too long!

It had taken more than two hours to find this armored ant and kill it. Doing the math, its hourly rate was only 1,500 XP.

God, that took ages. Okay, time to retrieve the magic stone.

While muttering grumpily to himself, Allen struck the torso with his sword.

Clang!

A "Huh?" unconsciously slipped Allen's lips. The torso had only gotten a little dented instead of being penetrated. He tried a few more times, but to no visible effect.

Uh-oh, is this short sword not good enough to even butcher an armored ant?!

Although this fifty-silver sword did eventually bisect a joint, it was apparently incapable of cutting through the torso. Allen gave up, partly because he did not want to waste any more time here, and partly because he was afraid he would chip his sword.

In exchange for the Summons that I lost and the magic stones I had to expend to replace them, I learned that killing armored ants is extremely inefficient and that I can't even take out their magic stones. This is definitely a monster that you're supposed to use magic against, not physical attacks. If anyone's going the physical route, they'd have to use something like a great sword for more power.

After concluding that the armored ant was an enemy that was beyond his current abilities and equipment, Allen looked up into the sky and found three Hawkins back from scouting.

Hawkins, armored ants are no good. Come on down if you found a single orc by itself.

One Bird E came down obediently. Allen followed it to where an orc should be waiting. Sure enough, after twenty minutes of running, he came upon a monster with its back against a tree trunk taking an afternoon nap. It was wearing very ragged clothing and had a face like a pig's. Its actual height was unclear as it was sitting, but there was little doubt it towered above the large majority of adult human males. There was a large spear on the ground next to the monster's limp hand. This was Allen's second time seeing an orc—the first was when he was looking for Cecil when she got lost close to a lake.

Monsters sleep too? Oh, wait, I just saw Ageha's Ability work on the armored ant, so that question's moot. Well, works out great for me that the orc is already asleep. Tamas, come out!

Allen called out fourteen Beast Es while once again peeking from behind a tree.

"Grrrrrr!"

The Beast Es, all fully Strengthened, surrounded the orc and started spamming Claw.

“Oiiiink!”

The orc screamed as fresh blood stained the brown fallen leaves on the ground.

Nice, the 250 Attack is paying off! So, Claw definitely works against orcs.

The fourteen-versus-one fight clearly did not need Allen to get directly involved. While watching on from a distance, he thought back to arm wrestling with Rodin and Gerda. Back then, he had beaten Gerda but lost to Rodin. At the time, his Attack had been a little under 300, leading him to guess that Rodin’s must have been between 300 to 350. Whenever Rodin would deal the finishing blow to a great boar, he always made sure to use his spear. In other words, he needed his Attack stat *and* the weapon to kill a great boar.

I see. I’m glad I did the arm wrestling.

Even while Allen was wrapped up in his thoughts, the Beast Es continued their assault. Soon enough, the orc fell to the ground, causing a small rumble.

<You have defeated 1 orc. You have earned 1,500 XP.>

The Rank E Summons had successfully hurt—and even killed—an orc, a Rank C monster equal to the great boar.

This is confirmation that I do possess the means to kill Rank C monsters. Based on the results of the arm wrestling back then and the state of this orc, I’m guessing that Claw deals 1.5 times normal damage.

One of Allen’s main goals for today was to confirm whether the Beast E Summons, which were specced exceptionally high in Attack, could be relied on as his main damage dealers. Their Attack, after being Strengthened, was 250, which was not all that high when compared to Rodin or the other members of Krena Village’s hunting party. It was true that orcs had much lower defense than great boars, but Allen had still worried whether his Summons’ attacks could actually be effective. If it had not worked on either armored ants or orcs, then he was planning on going back to hunting goblins.

As it turned out, although the armored ant was indeed too difficult, the orc could indeed be brought down with normal attacks and Claw.

Three Tamas got done in. But if I use Ageha and personally get involved, I think I can prevent any more from being wiped out.

Allen approached the orc corpse to retrieve its magic stone. Now that he could take a closer look, he realized the monster was about two and a half meters in height. Unlike the armored ant, his short sword plunged into the orc’s chest with little resistance. Out came a purple magic stone about the size of a ping-pong ball.

Wow, I've become capable of hunting Rank C monsters within a year.

This was a memorable moment for Allen. He had managed to kill a monster at the same rank as a great boar by himself. What was more, he had not relied on traps like he did for white deer. This was the result of his year of hunting goblins, raising his level, and diligently gathering Skill XP.

Hold on, what am I thinking? I still have a long, long way to go.

Allen caught himself just as he was starting to feel moved. Half a year ago, he had lost against Mihai so completely he could not even lift a finger. The eight years he spent raising his level and skills had been easily surpassed by Mihai developing his Talent at Academy City for a single year. The two months that he had devoted to dungeon delving had given him more growth than Allen's eight years combined. During the practice match, Allen had truly felt the vast chasm between the growth rate of Normal Mode and Hell Mode.

In this world, I can assume those who attend Academy City are particularly powerful.

Mihai had been forthcoming with details about the Academy. In short, being Talented or Talentless was not the only determinant of strength in this world.

- Strongest: Have a Talent and are graduates of the Academy
- 2nd Strongest: Have a Talent but did not graduate from the Academy
- 3rd Strongest: Talentless but are blessed in terms of physical build and stats
- Weakest: Talentless and not blessed in build or stats

Fewer than one percent of people fit into the first category. Categories one and two together made up less than ten percent. The Academy had a strict entrance exam and cost tuition. To graduate, students had to clear several assignments, and those who failed were expelled. It only made sense that those who actually managed to graduate had very impressive Statuses.

The chivalric orders were generally composed of a mix of those in the second and third tiers, with those of the first tier serving as officers or at least officer candidates. Zenof and Leibrand both belonged to this category.

When Allen heard all this, he thought back to when the five-year-old Krena completely overwhelmed Leibrand in a fight. Leibrand was apparently much stronger than Mihai, but Allen had difficulty understanding this within the context of what he had seen. Was Krena actually that strong, or did the vice-captain go easy on her?

The large majority of adventurers were in the third category. This made sense, as most people with Talents would enter government service or become employed in more professional roles. According to Raven,

adventurers in the second group could expect to go up to Rank B; if in the first group, then perhaps even Rank A.

So there are still differences within Normal Mode. Well then, it's time for little old me in Hell Mode to continue hunting. Let's try attacking two orcs together. Hawkins, find me a pair of orcs within three kilometers.

Allen switched gears and drew his mind back to hunting. The day's hunting had only just begun. In response to his command, the four Bird Es flew off into the distance.

Four hours later, Allen tallied his kill count for the day: one armored ant and fifteen orcs. That worked out to a total of 25,500 XP.

Ageha's Ability had worked on the orcs too, but not as effectively as it had on goblins. Whereas the chance of success for goblins had been around eighty percent, it was only sixty percent for orcs. However, Allen had confirmed that he could handle groups of up to three orcs together with limited casualties when he backed up the Beast Es with Insect Es, his iron balls, and his own direct participation.

All right, it's about time to go home.

Allen decided to break things up earlier than usual as he had come further away today, plus he still had to catch a few beasts to bring back for eating. He looked up at the sun in the sky, one of the very limited ways to check time in this world with no clocks.

Hm, when it was goblins, I had to work hard to get up to 25,000 XP. If I spend an entire day focusing on orcs, I might be able to get around 50,000. I should set my quota to forty orcs, then.

Ultimately, Allen concluded that hunting orcs was entirely viable at his current specs. This day, the target of Allen's level grinding officially shifted from the Rank D goblin to the Rank C orc.

Chapter 6: Fighting a Murdergalsh

“If you say anything rude to my tutor, I’m going to make you pay!”

“I will not. Don’t worry, milady.”

It was now early November, and Allen was currently with Cecil in the second-floor reception room, waiting for the magic tutor’s arrival. Allen was present for once—as opposed to having this time to himself elsewhere like he usually did during Cecil’s lessons—because of something that had occurred at the end of October.

That day, Cecil had called him to her room. He thought he would be sent on an errand again, but instead she had said, “Allen, you’ve done a good job being my personal manservant for a year. Tell me if there’s anything you want.” She had probably wanted to feel good about giving something to someone and therefore used the pretext of it being a present to Allen for his one year of service.

Despite not quite understanding the noteworthiness of “first anniversary as a manservant,” Allen still thought seriously about what to ask for. Just as he was about to ask for some of the snacks that she usually ate, an idea popped into his head: he wanted a lesson with her magic tutor. Not just staying in the room and sitting in on one of Cecil’s lessons, but one-on-one with the tutor himself.

Multiple tutors came to the Granvelle mansion each week, each teaching Cecil a different subject. This included history, mathematics, language, and of course, magic. The reason for the magic lessons was likely due to Cecil being a Wizardess.

Allen had half expected his request to be turned down, but Cecil simply went, “What? That’s all you want?” and readily agreed.

Then a few weeks passed, and today was the day Allen would get his magic lesson. After lunchtime, an elderly man wearing a robe and carrying a staff arrived at the mansion. Allen had met him multiple times before. This was Cecil’s magic tutor.

“So, you are my student today?”

“Yes, sir. Thank you very much for your time.”

During her last lesson, Cecil had told the tutor, “Please teach Allen next time.” He had accepted and promised to prepare for it. The bag he carried in the hand not holding his staff was much bulkier than usual, indicating that he had indeed spent both time and effort for Allen’s sake.

The tutor took the seat across from Allen’s and Cecil’s in the middle of the reception room.

“Your name is Allen, yes?” the old man asked while pulling his hood back. He had a white mustache and beard and plenty of wrinkles to show for his nearly seventy years of age. “I heard this is a one-off lesson, so I’ve prepared some things ahead of time. But before we start, is there anything you want to ask?”

While waiting for Allen's reply, the tutor took out several thick books and a crystal ball from his bag, lining them up on the table. Everything together should have been quite heavy, indicating that despite his age, this old man was actually quite strong.

Oh? I can ask anything I want? Then let's start with the thing I wanted to ask most.

Allen decided to take advantage of this opportunity to ask the question that he had originally intended on posing at the end of the lesson.

"Professor, what are the conditions for using magic?"

The man stroked his beard. "There is but one condition: Talent."

"Such as Mage and Wizard?"

"That is so. There are others, such as Archwizard, Sage, and Great Sage. It does not matter which one specifically, but one must have *a* Talent related to magic to use magic."

"Don't those with Talents like Cleric and Saintess also use magic?"

"Hm, I see you are rather knowledgeable. Cleric and Saintess use Healing Magic, whereas the Mage and Wizard you previously mentioned use Attack Magic."

"Is there no Support Magic?"

"Oh? You really *are* knowledgeable. However, Support Magic is limited to only Sage and Great Sage. Well, there are various other Talents that can use other kinds of magic, but the bottom line is, the condition is still Talent."

The tutor looked at Allen curiously because of how specific and well-informed his questions had been. Cecil also watched him in astonishment from her seat next to his.

Ah, I've dug too deep. It'd seem unnatural if I let slip how much I already know.

While taking notes in his grimoire, Allen said, "I see. Thank you for answering my questions. May I ask another one?"

"Of course."

"What is the process for using magic?"

The tutor picked up one of the thick books on the table. "You need to memorize the contents of books like this one. This specific one is for beginners and is the one that Lady Cecil is currently learning from."

Allen accepted the well-worn tome and casually flipped through the pages. "I…have no idea what is written here." *It's not in Japanese. I don't recognize this system of writing.*

Every page was packed chock-full of symbols that presumably held meaning. It bore no resemblance to Japanese or any other language that Allen remembered from Earth. The complicated geometric patterns did not seem to share any commonality even with each other.

"Well, to use magic, one would have to memorize these symbols. Each one corresponds to a different spell."

All of this?! Wow, I kinda feel bad for Cecil now.

“Is there anything else other than remembering all these?”

“Simply remembering is not enough; we need to truly memorize every detail of these symbols so well that we can draw them inside our heads. Activating a spell requires recalling its symbol and expending MP.”

“Conversely, does this mean you can use whatever spell you want as long as you memorize its symbol?”

“Unfortunately, it is not so easy.”

There was a certain progression to using magic. For beginner spells, it was true that one simply had to memorize the relevant symbol to use the spell. However, there were far more spells that could not be cast until after casting other spells many times over and overcoming multiple Trials of the Gods.

Ah, in other words, use earlier spells a bunch of times to level the skill up, and the thing with overcoming Trials of the Gods probably refers to raising max MP.

“By the way, do you have any way to confirm whether I can use magic or not?”

“Huh?! But you’re Talentless, Allen! Weren’t you listening? You can’t use magic if you don’t have the Talent for it!”

Cecil sounded indignant at Allen for asking something with such an obvious answer. Everyone’s general understanding was that Allen did not have a Talent.

“It’s fine, Lady Cecil. I did bring a crystal ball just in case. Allen, this crystal ball is able to determine whether someone can use magic or not.”

As it turned out, “Can I use magic?” was a very common question from those who demonstrated an interest in the subject. The tutor explained that the crystal ball he had brought along performed a function akin to a simplified form of Appraisal. It was specialized for sensing whether someone had a Talent related to magic or not.

“Thank you, sir!”

Whoa, just the description of the item alone is getting me hyped up! Now I can know once and for all whether the Summoner class can use magic or not!

The crystal ball, which measured around ten centimeters in diameter, looked like a smaller version of the one Allen had seen during his Appraisal Ceremony. The tutor placed it in front of Allen and said, “Put your hands on top.”

“Yes, sir!” Allen replied eagerly, promptly doing as he was told.

However, nothing happened. Allen kept his hands on the crystal ball for a while longer, but the transparent sphere showed no reaction whatsoever.

“Mm, as you can see, Allen, you are not able to use magic.”

“Seriously?” But that means...

The nightmarish possibility that Allen had been doing his best to ignore so far now took on a tinge of reality. He looked so shocked that Cecil said

gently, as if speaking to a younger sibling, “Allen, give it up. You don’t have the Talent for it, so you can’t use magic.”

Allen started. “By the way, what happens if you put your hands on this crystal, milady?”

“What?! How dare you question the professor!” Cecil roared, strangling Allen by the collar for asking a question that blatantly cast doubt on his explanation of the crystal ball. The two raised such a commotion that the tutor had to intervene.

“Now, now, Lady Cecil. It is fine. And since we are at it, would you like to give it a try? I’m sure it would satisfy Allen’s curiosity as well.”

Yes, please show me! I promise to accept the results for what they are. Ugh, I feel sick.

Despite being strangled and shaken, Allen used his eyes to beg Cecil to touch the crystal ball. Upon being placated by the tutor, she sighed, let Allen go, and turned to place her hands on the sphere on the table. When she did so, it shone with a bright yellow light that was warm like sunlight.

The tutor nodded with satisfaction. “Yellow is the color for Wizard and Wizardess.”

It actually lit up...

Allen stared at the light in a stunned daze. Ever since he had been told he would get his time with the magic tutor, he had spent hours and hours thinking of questions to ask, but all of those questions had now vacated his head. He had previously hoped to see a display of magic as well, but he now had much bigger worries.

I’m screwed. This confirms that Summoner is just a joke class.

Currently, Allen’s stats as a Summoner were: HP (Rank A), MP (Rank S), Attack (Rank C), Endurance (Rank C), Agility (Rank A), Intelligence (Rank S), and Luck (Rank A). How much a stat would grow from each level-up varied according to ranking, with “S” being the most and “E” the least. Allen’s Intelligence was “S.”

Why is my Intelligence at Rank S even though I can’t use magic?! And because of that, my Attack and Endurance have been brought down to Rank C!

Allen’s assumption was that his other stats had been made low to balance out his high Intelligence. However, he could not use magic and his Summons did not benefit in any particular way from him having high Intelligence. As it stood, the only benefit was being better at remembering things. This stat was useless to him, especially when it came at the expense of the others. Him having to fight with a sword with this Status was as inefficient and preposterous as a mage character dual-wielding swords.

In other words, my class is a joke. Are my stats intentionally nerfed to balance out the buffs I get from my Summons? Why was my class built this way?!

Several possible reasons for the crystal ball not lighting up came to mind.

- The endless complaints that he’d sent to the gods during the six months after his Appraisal Ceremony had angered them, causing them to change Summoner to a joke class.
- The crystal ball was faulty.
- Whether someone could use magic or not was actually based on their level or skill level.
- There was an incredible secret behind why his Intelligence was Rank S.

W-Was it really because I complained too much? Oh Lord Elmea, how could you?!

Allen was left staring off into the distance in a daze. The lesson with the magic tutor that he had received as a reward for his first anniversary as a manservant thus ended quietly and without any hubbub.

□□□

One month had passed since Allen’s magic lesson, making it now December. The first snow of the year had fallen the other day, with it soon being time for the snow clouds to truly gather in force.

Allen was on serving duty today, and it was now lunch. There were times when members of the baron’s family did not show up for breakfast or lunch, but everyone was present today, with the sole exception of Mihai, who was still living at Academy City.

“Thomas, you shouldn’t eat so much.”

When the second son reached out to the bread basket in the middle of the table and brought several slices back to his own plate, his mother admonished him.

Ever since Allen became a huntsman last December, he had gone out hunting two days every week with only a very small number of exceptions. Now that it was winter, the only edible monsters readily available were horned rabbits. Even so, Allen still brought back around a hundred kilograms of meat per week. The baron family’s fare had been the picture perfect illustration of thrifty living a year ago; now, even the lowliest servant in the household was enjoying a remarkably improved diet.

A new problem that had cropped up—if it could be called that—due to this change was Thomas developing a huge appetite. At the very least, the baroness considered this a problem, and she had gone down to the kitchen multiple times to ask Dudley to make less food for Thomas. Because of this, however, Thomas had started eating more bread during meals, and this was what had led to the earlier exchange. Although he did apologize, he made no move to return the slices of bread to the basket.

I mean, he’s eleven. He’s going through a growth spurt—all boys eat like that at that age. He has sword practice in the afternoons, so I doubt there’s any worry of him getting too chubby.

Allen actually felt a little sorry for the dispirited Thomas. The family had hired a sword instructor who had started giving Thomas lessons this year. The glimpses of them together in the garden that Allen caught every once in a while caused him to wonder if learning the sword was simply a part of the duties of being a noble, regardless of Talent.

"By the way, Allen, when will you be catching another white deer?" Thomas asked, interrupting Allen's thoughts.

"I am waiting for the snow to pile a little higher first, young master."

"I'm looking forward to it!"

After this exchange, lunch returned to normal. At least, for a short while.

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!

The city bell began sounding incessantly, the sound reaching the mansion and showing no signs of letting up. Noon had been rung in just now, so there was no way this was the 3 p.m. bell.

"What is going on?!" Baron Granvelle roared, leaping to his feet, as the baroness and Thomas looked around anxiously. Everyone else who heard the bell shared their sentiments.

"I shall go confirm," Sebas said, leaving the baron's side and heading out of the dining hall.

Everyone else, including Allen, remained where they were, waiting for the butler's return. He came back around fifteen minutes later with a knight.

"There you are. So, what's happening?!" the baron demanded.

"Master, a murdergalsh is approaching the city," the butler replied. The knight at his side, who was very out of breath, nodded vigorously.

Did he say murdergalsh?!

Allen recognized the name—it was the name of the monster that his younger brother, Mash, had been named after. He had been told that it was a Rank B monster that looked like a huge wolf.

"What?! Why did we not receive word of this sooner?! When will it arrive?!"

The knight got down on one knee before replying. To sum up what he said, a squad on patrol had first spotted the murdergalsh. It had been heading straight for Granvelle City, so the knights had attempted to attract its attention to draw it away elsewhere. However, despite multiple casualties, they had been unsuccessful. At this rate, the monster would reach the city's south gate at around 3 p.m. There were less than two hours left.

"What are your orders, Master?" Sebas asked.

"Where's Zenof? Is he not back yet?"

"Master, both the knight captain and vice-captain are currently out on a monster-slaying expedition. They will not be back until the day after."

The baron knew full well that Zenof was not here, but he simply could not help but ask.

“In that case, issue an emergency quest with the Adventurer’s Guild. Most monsters are dormant at this time of the year, so there should be many adventurers in town. We can only hope Silver Fang of the Gale is here too.”

Ah, that’s the name of the only Rank A adventurer party based in Granvelle City, if I remember right.

A group of adventurers operating together was called a party. Raven, Rita, and Milci were in a party together, with Raven being the leader. According to what Allen had heard from him, the large majority of adventurers in Granvelle City were Rank C or lower, with there being only a handful of Rank B parties and a single Rank A one.

From December to when the snows melted in March, most adventurers would just hunker down behind city walls. Only those who were truly struggling to make ends meet would go outside during this time. Allen was pretty much the only person who continued to hunt with no regard for the weather.

“Understood, Master. What shall we do with the gate?”

Sebas had been asking Baron Granvelle for instructions on things one after the other while Allen had been occupied with recalling what Raven had told him about adventurers.

“Are you asking if we would close them?! How can we do that when there might be those heading to our city who do not yet know about the murdergalsh’s approach?!”

“However, would that not also allow the monster to enter?”

“The gate must be kept open! Order the knights and adventurers to head for the south gate immediately and chase the monster away!”

“As you wish, Master.”

Having received all the orders he needed, the butler hurried out of the dining hall with the knight. They now had to pass word on to the relevant chains of command.

This…is my job, isn’t it?

Allen, who had stayed quiet until the butler was done, now approached the baron. “My lord, may I have permission to join the fight?”

“What?”

Allen had sounded so matter-of-fact that the baron was entirely taken aback. Cecil immediately flared up.

“Huh?! What’re you saying?! You heard them! It’s a murdergalsh! Of course you can’t join in!”

“Milady.”

“Wh-What?!”

“Your father, Baron Granvelle, instated me as a huntsman. I consider it part of my duties to join this fight.”

“Huh?!”

Cecil looked very surprised, but it was true that one of the duties of a huntsman was to save citizens of the realm who were being attacked by monsters outside a settlement. Allen had done so multiple times already over the past year. Aside from culling monsters and bringing meat back, he had also headed over whenever Hawkins spotted anyone who was in trouble. If today had been one of Allen's hunting days, he would have already rushed out by now. It was because today was *not* a hunting day that he was asking the baron for express permission.

Cecil had fallen silent, so Allen turned back to the baron, pleading with his eyes.

"I…see," the baron managed in a voice lower and heavier than usual. He had realized that Allen's argument was logical and irrefutable. "If you are fulfilling the duties that I assigned you, then I have no reason to stop you."

It looked like Cecil wanted to say something, but she swallowed her words back down.

"Thank you, my lord. I shall head over immediately. Due to the urgency of the situation, I will do so in my current attire."

"Mm, prioritize evacuating the people rather than fighting the murdergalsh."

"Yes, my lord."

The moment Allen stepped out of the dining hall, he took off at a dash.

There's no time. The city is in a panic right now, and it'd probably be hard to run through the crowds. I should leave from the north gate and circle around to the south gate.

The Granvelle mansion was located in the northern part of the city. It was a much shorter distance simply taking the large avenue that ran in a straight line down the middle of the city. However, Allen was worried that the city would be in a state of mayhem at the moment, especially in the center and south areas. As such, he determined that it would be faster to take the long way around.

Please, MP, recover quickly.

This situation had been entirely unexpected. On days when he did not plan on going hunting, Allen would convert all his MP into Skill XP. The last time he did this was three hours ago, meaning his tank was completely empty right now.

Allen passed through the north gate in his black servant uniform, then picked up the pace even more while running southward. Slightly over two hours later, he finally reached the south gate, finding it choked with a whole line of people desperately trying to get in. Adventurers and knights were protectively stationed around the overflowing crowds.

A huge figure over five meters tall towered a slight distance away. There was something in its hands; when Allen took a better look, he realized it was a horse that had already lost half of its body. The monster was in the middle of eating the rest of it, chewing loudly.

That's a murdergalsh?!

Allen had heard the murdergalsh described as a large wolf, but what he was seeing could hardly be called such. At the end of front legs that looked like human arms, it had large fingers that also looked especially humanlike. Worst of all, its face was a revolting cross between human and canine. Between its two hind legs was a slowly swishing tail; the lower half of its body was the only part that looked like a wolf.

Right beside where the murdergalsh was eating the horse was a carriage with broken wheels that had fallen over. A trail of mangled horse and human corpses stretched into the distance from the direction that the murdergalsh had presumably come from, painting a literal road of blood. One only had to take a single look at this sight to understand why the word "murder" was part of this monster's name.

"Young man! What're you doing over there?! Hurry up and get inside the city!"

One of the knights had noticed Allen standing still and called out to him, but Allen ignored him and continued observing the murdergalsh. In all likelihood, the horse that the monster was currently eating had been the one pulling the carriage, and the dead man on the ground a slight distance away had served as its coachman. Suddenly, Allen noticed silhouettes moving within the carriage. There were people still inside.

That moment, the murdergalsh reached out with its free hand and tore off the canopy covering the carriage, revealing a mother and daughter trembling in each other's arms, too frightened to even scream. The monster's face twisted into an eerie smirk, its humanlike features making it look all the more terrifying. The blood that stained its teeth dripped down from its fangs, forming small puddles below.

Drip, drop, drip, drop.

The knights and adventurers stayed in their positions, bracing themselves to protect the merchants and travelers trying to get inside the city. They watched the scene with bated breath, but made no move to save the mother and daughter. However, Allen saw no need to follow what they were doing. He took out an iron ball from Storage, not caring who saw him do so.

The murdergalsh reached out toward the mother and daughter. It did so slowly as if purposely trying to evoke as much terror as possible from its prey.

Drop dead, you piece of shit!

That instant, Allen threw his iron ball with as much strength as he could muster. The projectile flew straight and true, squashing one of the monster's eyeballs.

"AAAAAAAAUUUUUHHHHHHH!" the monster shrieked in a hair-raising cry.

"Hey, you want a piece of me? I'm right here! I'm gonna kill you!"

Allen had managed to destroy one of its eyes. He threw a second iron ball, but the murdergalsh, which was now aware of Allen's existence, easily

swatted it away with its front limb. He heard voices shouting things like, “What’re you doing, boy?!” and “Hurry, run away!” behind his back, but he paid them no mind, dashing off to position himself on the opposite side of the monster from the carriage and city with the White Dragon Mountains at his back. When he turned around briefly to provoke the monster again —“What’s wrong, you stupid mutt? You scared of me? What a coward!”—he saw adventurers, knights, and travelers all looking his way with unease in their eyes.

Allen threw another iron ball, but the murdergalsh easily deflected that one too. Although it had lost one eye, it clearly remained more than capable of protecting itself from taking any further damage from Allen’s iron balls. Even so, the boy was about to throw another one, simply for the sake of drawing the monster’s attention. But just then, the monster, which had only turned its head toward Allen’s direction so far, slowly stood up on its hind legs, reaching almost seven meters in height.

“AAAAAUUUHHHHHHHHH!”

It howled, then threw away the half-eaten horse, sending it flying through the air in an arc before slamming into the ground with a loud crash. The monster then got down on all fours and turned to face Allen.

“Come at me!”

In response to Allen’s goading, the murdergalsh started off at a trot, quickly accelerating into a full-speed charge.

All right, I succeeded in making it target me instead of the passengers of the carriage.

Allen shouted loudly at the knights and adventurers, “I’m going to draw the murdergalsh toward the White Dragon Mountains!” before turning and running off at full speed. He called out his grimoire to check his MP and found it still at zero.

Still?! It should be back anytime now!

The distance between Allen and the murdergalsh gradually shrunk as the two continued racing on.

“Holy cra—!”

Soon enough, the monster had caught up, despite Allen’s Agility being over 600. It took a swing with one of its front arms. Allen barely managed to dodge the attack, but doing so caused him to lose his balance and fall over. After rolling several times on the ground, he quickly got back up and whirled around to regain a visual on the monster, fully expecting a follow-up attack. However, it simply stared down at him with a smirk, showing no indication of attacking. Apparently it had enjoyed the sight of Allen falling. The way it no longer seemed bothered about losing an eye only added to its eeriness.

Ah, this is what games are referring to when monsters skip their turn and the text says, “The monster smirks at you.”

Allen had, in his past life as Kenichi, played computer games with turn-based combat systems where the player’s and the game monster’s sides

took turns attacking each other. Sometimes, however, the monsters did nothing during their turn—instead, there was only a pop-up that read something like, “The monster smirks at you.” Back then, Kenichi only counted it as a lucky break and did not give it any further thought. Now that a monster was actually doing it to him in real life, he finally understood why it happened. In the murdergalsh’s single remaining eye, Allen was nothing more than a toy.

Well, I’ll still count this as a lucky break ’cause my MP just came back!

Allen cast a quick glance at his grimoire and confirmed that the MP field in his Status was no longer zero.

I need more Agility. The two types of cards that buff Agility are Bird, which also buffs Intelligence, and Insect, which also buffs Endurance. Okay, Agility and Endurance are exactly what I need right now.

While slowly backing up, Allen did his best to act like he was in despair so as to make the murdergalsh lower its guard. He even shivered and pulled a look of absolute terror.

“AAAAUUUHHHHH!”

The murdergalsh’s human-dog face twisted into a look of ecstasy and delight.

Talk about having a shit personality. I can never tell Mash about this. Father, you have the worst naming sense ever!

This monster had been the inspiration for “Mash,” the name of Allen’s younger brother. Now that he knew its personality, however, he realized that it was not exactly the best thing to name a child after. He dearly wished that if Theresia had another child, it would be a girl so that she would be the one to decide on a name.

Allen kept up the act of being frightened as he quickly used his grimoire to change up the distribution of the cards he had in stock. Because the necessary magic stones were already inside Storage, he simply had to will the process and the book would take care of the rest by itself. All twenty of the Grass E cards that he had been keeping to raise his max MP were now changed to Insect E instead. The grimoire’s pages flipped furiously as cards were Deleted and Created in quick succession. While he was at it, Allen converted the Beast E and Beast F cards he had relied on for Attack to Insect E too. In the end, that left him with four Bird E cards and thirty-six Insect E cards.

The reason Allen had basically gone full Agility was because the murdergalsh had clearly been faster than him just now. He had yet to find out just how strong it was, but he had no interest in finding out by letting himself get caught.

Allen backed off a little more. Seeing that the monster was not going to immediately pounce, he turned tail and dashed off. A loud boom sounded at his back, followed by the pounding of footfalls. Allen attempted to determine his relative distance to the monster through the sound and pushed himself to maintain his lead.

This isn't enough. I've got to go farther away.

Drawing the murdergalsh away from Granvelle City was a given, but considering this opportunity, Allen wanted to attempt killing it outright. Currently, he was only several hundred meters away from the collapsed carriage. The figures of the knights and adventurers in the distance were no more than mere specks by now, but he wanted to gain more distance so that he could freely use his Summons to fight.

The deadly game of tag continued until the hunter and prey reached an area sparsely populated with trees almost two kilometers away from Granvelle City. This was far enough that they were entirely beyond the sight of everyone in the city.

All right. Ageha, use your Ability!

Allen called out three Insect Es behind himself without stopping. As the murdergalsh was a Rank B monster, three Insect Es were needed in order for their Ability, Scale Powder, to be effective.

Yellow powder fell on the murdergalsh's head. It stopped in its tracks, so Allen also stopped running and turned around, hopeful.

"AAAAAUUUHHHH!"

With a cry, the beast swung its front arm and swept away all three Insect Es in one blow, reducing them to glowing bubbles that faded into the air.

What?! It didn't work?! Does it have resistances? Or did I just get unlucky?

The debuffs cast through the Abilities of the Insect cards were not a hundred percent guaranteed to work. After trying only once, there was no way to tell whether Scale Powder only happened to fail this time or it simply would not work, period.

Crap, it's after me again.

With the Insect E Summons gone, the game of tag resumed. Allen Created more Insect Es to replace the ones he had just lost and continued running in desperation.

Three long, long hours later, Allen was hiding behind a tree. The murdergalsh was nowhere in sight.

Ugh, I finally lost it. But man, Scale Powder just isn't working on it at all. None of the other Insect card debuffs work either, for that matter.

Allen took out his mantle from Storage and draped it over his manservant uniform. During the chase just now, he had attempted to use the Abilities of Insects G, F, and E on the murdergalsh, but none of them had proved effective. Because of this, he had given up the idea of killing the monster and was focusing entirely on escaping. This was not an opponent that he could stand up to without the support of debuffs.

All right, let's head back to Granvelle City. Dammit, I ended up using a lot of magic stones.

Just as Allen was regretting the significant decrease in his stock of Rank E magic stones...

Crack. Snap.

The tree that Allen was leaning against shook, and a beastly stench filled his nose.

“What?!”

Allen whirled around in surprise to look behind the tree. What he found was the smirking face of the murdergalsh. It deftly used its humanlike hands to pull the tree out as if plucking a mere weed. This served as the signal for the game of tag to resume once more.

□□□

Three days had passed since the murdergalsh appeared near Granvelle City.

One of the guards at the north gate spotted Allen returning. His black manservant uniform was all muddy, and he was huddled in his mantle.

“Hey there, lad!”

Oh, I’m finally back.

“Good—”

Upon reaching the gate with tottering steps, Allen collapsed in the middle of giving his usual greeting. He had lost consciousness as if a switch had been turned off.

“Huh? Lad, a-are you okay?!”

The guard rushed over in surprise and found the boy already fast asleep.

This was how Allen’s first encounter with the murdergalsh came to an end.

□ □ □

Allen slowly opened his eyes. “Where…?”

Is this…the mansion? Hm? Is this one of the guest rooms? Huh? What happened to me? What happened to the murdergalsh?!

The sight of the murdergalsh’s eerie grin flashed into Allen’s mind, causing him to suddenly sit upright in bed. His memories were still jumbled. He looked down and found himself wearing his usual sleepwear instead of his uniform. Someone must have helped him change.

“You’ve awakened,” Sebas said from the bedside. He had apparently been keeping vigil.

“Y-Yes, sir. Um, what happened to me?”

“How much do you remember?” the butler asked slowly, picking up on Allen’s confusion.

This question seemed to help jog the boy’s memories. He had been chased by the murdergalsh for three days and nights. He had somehow managed to finally lose it and then turned back toward Granvelle City.

“I don’t remember anything after figuring out the direction home and setting out.”

“Well, you collapsed in front of the north gate. A guard carried you back here. Two days ago, that is.”

“I…see…”

“I will now go and summon Zenof. When he arrives, you will go see Master and report on what happened with the murdergalsh. Any questions?”

“None, sir. Completely understood.”

“Mm. There is still time, so continue resting for now.”

“Thank you, sir.”

After the butler left the guest room, Allen fell back asleep, fully enjoying the fluffy bed normally reserved for VIP guests. When he woke up again, he found a tray loaded with food at his bedside. Just as he finished wolfing it down, savoring every morsel, the knight captain arrived at the mansion. Another servant came into the room to tell Allen to head to the conference room on the third floor.

The conference room, huh? I’ve never been before. It’s this way, right?

Despite having worked in this mansion for over a year, Allen had yet to enter the baron’s bedroom, study, or conference room.

When Allen reached the third floor, he found Zenof waiting for him outside the conference room.

“How are you feeling, Allen?”

“Well rested and fully recovered, Sir.”

“Glad to hear it. The guildmaster of the Adventurer’s Guild is inside at the moment. We will wait here until he finishes his business.”

“Understood, Sir.”

Is it regarding the murdergalsh? I remember the baron talking about an emergency quest or something. But boy, this sure turned into a big deal.

Allen recalled everything that had happened after he left the north gate. Due to his game of tag with the murdergalsh, he had gotten a very good grasp on the strength of a Rank B monster. He now knew beyond a doubt that at his current level and Summoning level, Rank C was the limit of what he could defeat.

He then recalled the adventurers and knights who had simply looked on as the carriage was being assaulted. They had probably also really wanted to help but were painfully aware of their own limitations. Allen now understood the conflict that had been going on inside their minds all too well.

There were almost no adventurers or knights possessing a Talent who could go toe-to-toe against a Rank B monster. In the first place, the overwhelming majority of adventurers were Talentless. From what Raven had said, there was likely only one adventurer in the entire Granvelle realm who could put up a fight against a Rank B monster: the leader of the top-ranked party, Silver Fang of the Gale.

And right now, the man touted as *the* strongest in the realm, stronger than even the party leader of Silver Fang of the Gale, was currently standing right beside Allen. Allen had never seen him in an actual fight before, but all sources had assured him of Zenof's overwhelming strength. In fact, he had even earned an alias: War Demon Zenof. This was why the baron had asked about him first thing when he received news of the murdergalsh.

According to word on the street, the knight captain's Talent was Sword Master. Allen had never heard of it before, but he suspected that it was the two-star class between the one-star Swordsman and three-star Sword Lord.

Just as Allen was occupied with thinking about the knight captain, Sebas emerged from the conference room with a brawny bald man. This was the guildmaster of the Adventurer's Guild branch in Granvelle City. He had stayed for dinner at the mansion several times on days when Allen had been on serving duty.

"All right, I'm leaving. Goddammit."

Hm? He seems kind of irked about something. Is it about the emergency quest?

Allen and the guildmaster's eyes met, so Allen bowed and said, "Good day, sir."

The man's eyes widened slightly. "Alle—"

"Even if you have business with our staff," Sebas interrupted, "I'm afraid he is currently unavailable as he needs to report to the baron."

"Tch, nah, I got no business. Just wanted to say, well done making it back alive, kid."

The boy was surprised the guildmaster knew his name, but before he could continue, Sebas cut in and escorted the guildmaster out of the

mansion. It seemed he had been about to say something but instead ended with giving Allen's head a few pats while passing by.

Huh? What was that for? It seemed like Sebas had been trying to prevent him from talking to me. Why's that?

After seeing the guildmaster off, Sebas returned to the third floor and entered the conference room together with Zenof and Allen. Allen was gestured toward the seat directly across from the baron's on the other side of the aged, circular table in the middle of the room.

"Are you well enough to be up and moving? I am glad to see you returned to us without any major injuries."

"Yes, my lord, I am well. I apologize for all the trouble I have caused."

"Hm? You have nothing to apologize for. That said, I do want to hear all the details of what happened between you and the murdergalsh. This might affect the response that I take, so be as detailed as you can."

Allen nodded his head in acknowledgment, then recounted his experience. He told of how the murdergalsh had already gotten quite close when he finally arrived at the south gate and how he found the carriage under attack. He had then thrown iron balls at the monster in order to save the mother and child in the carriage and attract the monster's attention. Then he drew the beast toward the White Dragon Mountains so that it would no longer attack the city.

The baron listened to Allen with a frown. Every once in a while, he turned to look at Zenof as if seeking confirmation of the credibility in what Allen was saying. Every time, the knight captain simply nodded.

"The murdergalsh was extremely persistent. I lost it multiple times, but it still continued coming after me."

"And that is why you could not return for three days, yes? I had received reports of a boy wearing the Granvelle servant uniform leading the murdergalsh away from the city. I had assumed you were dead and eaten."

Many knights and adventurers had witnessed what Allen had done near the south gate. Naturally, word had reached the baron's ears.

"Yes, my lord. Unfortunately, my memory is somewhat fuzzy, but I believe I finally lost the monster quite far away."

Because he had no way to prove anything without also revealing his abilities as a Summoner, Allen was a bit vague regarding where and how he had lost the murdergalsh. The truth, however, was that he had gone all the way to the foot of the White Dragon Mountains. Along the way, he had encountered monsters like white deer and armored ants that he had purposely tried to set on the murdergalsh. However, this had proved pointless, as the murdergalsh easily trampled them and went right back to chasing Allen.

"I see. I now have the full picture. First of all, I will say this: do not worry about being penalized for being absent from your duties as manservant and server during this ordeal. After all, you were doing your best to save my citizens. Rather, you will be rewarded."

“R-Really?!” I’m getting a reward! It feels like ages since the mention of the last one!

“This is the reward.”

Two small bags were placed on the table. They made a clinking sound, which got Allen’s hopes up even higher.

Are they filled with coins?! Hold on…but why two bags?

“This is ten gold from me in reward for your efforts in this incident. According to reports, the emergency quest has been called off, meaning that the situation is over. The number of casualties among the citizens, adventurers, and knights have been kept to a minimum.”

The baron had chosen the words “kept to a minimum” because, sadly, there had indeed been casualties.

“Thank you, my lord.” Damn, ten gold. He’s being really generous.

Allen had been at this mansion for a little over a year by now, and there was one thing that he had learned: this family, despite being nobility, was very poor. Back when he first arrived, he had found their diet even more meager than what he had eaten as a serf. In hindsight, Allen realized that the reason the baron had rewarded Rodin and the hunters of Krena Village with commoner status was most likely because he could not afford to give them anything tangible. After all, making serfs commoners did not cost anything.

A royal envoy had visited the Granvelle mansion twice in the past year. Both times, the topic was on raising the head tax in the fiefdom. The envoy had insisted that there was room for a raise—perhaps not making it as high as it was in the neighboring Carnel realm, but there was room nonetheless. On the other hand, Baron Granvelle had firmly said no both times, unwilling to further burden his people. Unfortunately, the low head tax he had set meant that his income through tax was not enough to pay the amount that the national treasury expected from his realm. Consequently, he was paying for the difference out of his own pocket. This was why, despite being nobles, his family lived very frugally. Allen, for one, thought their poverty an honorable one.

The baron continued, interrupting Allen’s thoughts. “Now, this other bag. It also contains ten gold, making this a total of twenty gold. This is from the family of those who were in the carriage you saved.”

“The carriage, sir?”

As it turned out, the passengers in the carriage had been the wife and daughter of the owner of a high-class inn located on one of the city’s main avenues. The man had left this amount at the baron’s mansion to express his gratitude.

Woohoo! That mithril sword I was eyeing is finally within reach!

Allen had been considering buying a steel sword for five gold, but thanks to this sudden windfall, he could now afford a mithril sword. He wanted to immediately rush to a weapons store as soon as this audience was over, but

it turned out there were a lot more things that needed to be delved into. In the end, the shops were all closed by the time Allen was finally dismissed.

Chapter 7: Summoning Lvl. 5

“Heh heh heh, a mithril sword cuts so well!” Allen chuckled excitedly.

On this particular day off, he was once again far outside of Granvelle City. The other day, he had received a total of twenty gold for driving the murdergalsh from town and saving the family of a high-class inn’s owner. Allen had used this money, together with the five gold from his own savings, to buy a mithril sword.

As he was still only nine years old, a full-length sword would be too long for him to wield properly. He had therefore asked the weapons store to make him one halfway between a short sword and a dagger. Luckily, the owner was willing to lower the price from the original thirty gold since he used less mithril for the shorter weapon.

Hmm, the armor’s really tough, so I still can’t penetrate it directly. But the body inside is so soft I almost feel like I’m cutting through air.

Allen was currently testing out his new sword against an armored ant, comparing how it felt against the sword he had received from Dogora.

With this, I can now loot magic stones from armored ants.

The last time Allen had killed one of these monsters, he had had no other choice but to leave it virtually untouched, magic stone and all. This time, he clambered over the three-meter-tall body once more.

Damn, you really are huge.

When looking at the armored ant, the strange feeling that Allen had felt about the monsters in this world ever since he was six washed over him again. He had almost mistaken the albaheron—with its wingspan of over two meters—for a wyvern, only to be told later that it was merely Rank D. The great boar, which towered at more than three meters tall, had almost killed Rodin with a single blow, even though he should have raised his level quite high after ten years of hunting.

This strange feeling had only grown stronger when Allen came to Granvelle City. The muscular and vicious goblins were, again, only Rank D. Armored ants reached three meters in height and were protected by shells impervious against common weapons, but were Rank C. Orcs, which were two and a half meters tall and had enough intelligence to use weapons, also had the same ranking. And as discovered recently, the Rank B murdergalsh was capable of killing both knights and adventurers with a single stomp. Its very name evoked terror and, understandably, the reward for killing it went all the way up to two hundred gold.

It’s just…I can’t quite put my finger on it. I mean, it’s not like I’d ever seen monsters before coming to this world, but it’s like…they’re all one notch stronger than what I expected them to be?

Unfortunately, Allen’s attempt to articulate this indefinable feeling did not work out.

Never mind, I can think about this later. There's something that I really want to test out today.

Allen had decided to lower his kill quota for the day to make time for looking into something he had discovered while being chased by the murdergalsh for three days and nights. He looked up at the sky and saw Bird Es circling above. He had instructed them before to immediately inform him when they spotted certain monsters or adventurers; those instructions now included the murdergalsh as well. After all, Allen had no idea where it had gone after he lost it in the foothills of the White Dragon Mountains. There was a chance that it might head back to attack Granvelle City again while he was out hunting.

According to Raven, the murdergalsh mainly popped up on the open roads between settlements, almost never launching a full-out assault on villages or cities. Allen recognized this behavioral pattern; it was the same as field boss monsters inside games.

Field bosses were powerful monsters unrelated to the main story or events that constantly roamed about the open areas of a game. After being killed, these bosses would simply respawn. They had a tendency to suddenly show up in areas where low-leveled players gathered and would wipe them all out. Technically, they could be considered the products born of the game developers' playfulness.

Two Hawkins, come down. Another one of you, fly around for five minutes, then come back.

One of the Summons flew off in a random direction as two others came down. Allen reverted one of them into card form. This was the start of his experiment.

Hawkins, look at this.

Allen showed the Hawkins that remained on the ground a jute bag, making sure that it saw there was nothing inside. Then he took out a molmo and put it inside the bag. After that, he took out another molmo, a strip of jerky, and a dried potato, lining them up on the ground.

Now, Hawkins. Which of these did I just put into the bag? Peck at the answer with your beak.

The bird that had been watching Allen throughout the entire process chose the molmo without hesitation.

Okay, good job. Now, you come out.

Allen called out the Hawkins he had turned into a card earlier. This one had not seen him putting a molmo into the jute bag.

Tell me which of these items is inside the bag. Don't guess—if you don't know, don't choose.

The Hawkins that had been in card form also chose the molmo without hesitation.

I see. So you really do know.

This result was exactly as Allen had expected. Just then, the bird that had flown five minutes away returned.

Come on down. Okay, good! Now you tell me which of these is inside this bag. If you don't know, shake your head.

The bird shook its head.

All right, so you don't know. That's fine. Next, Create.

Allen used one magic stone to Create a new Bird E and Summoned it. He raised its Intelligence through Strengthening to give it the ability to understand speech, then asked it to also guess what was inside the jute bag.

It immediately chose the molmo.

As I'd suspected. So even the newly Created one knows. Now, Poppo, come out.

This time, Allen Summoned a Bird F. Once again, he Strengthened it, then asked it the same question.

Unlike the just-Created Bird E, this Bird F shook its head.

So you don't know. Hmm, I guess being chased by the murdergalsh wasn't a total waste of time.

Allen had run nonstop for three days and nights, forgoing even sleep. During that time, he had used Hawkins's Ability, Hawk Eyes, to confirm the murdergalsh's location. The monster that served as "it" in this deadly game of tag doggedly kept on Allen's tail, doing everything in its power to find him. Somewhere along the way, it figured out that the hawks that flew up every now and then would return to where he was and therefore started following the birds in turn. On the ropes, Allen came up with the idea to order Hawkins not to return to where he was after locating the murdergalsh. When he Created a new Hawkins and told that one to go search for the murdergalsh, to his surprise it took off as if it already knew where the monster's location was.

Seeing that, Allen made a mental note to properly explore how the Summons shared and passed on information and knowledge.

Let's sum up what I just learned.

Allen had put a molmo into a bag in front of only one Bird E. The Bird E that he subsequently Summoned from a card as well as the one that he Created from scratch knew what he had done, whereas the one that had been out the entire time and the newly Created Bird F had no idea.

So it's basically like this, then?

- A Summon's knowledge is synced to the most up-to-date version whenever it is Created or Summoned.
- Knowledge is only shared within type and rank.

It'd have been so much more convenient without the fifty meter limit, but I guess there's no point crying over it now.

Fifty Meter Rule

- Summons can only be called out from and returned to card form within fifty meters around Allen.

- Summons also need to be within fifty meters to receive the order from Allen to use their Abilities.

Allen looked at the Bird Es staring back at him, awaiting orders.

So you guys are constantly being updated, huh? In other words, you're continuously accumulating knowledge and growing together with me.

Thanks to the deadly game of tag, Allen had received in this discovery a reward that he considered much more valuable than any amount of gold.

The Summons were conscious and were continuously adding to what they knew. As long as their Summoner, Allen, remained, they were existences that would continue to learn and grow in a process that surpassed even death.

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The year turned and it was now March. Allen was in the middle of a match in the garden of the Granvelle estate.

Clang! Clang!

Damn, he's still completely overwhelming me.

Since it was March, Cecil's oldest brother Mihai had returned home from Academy City again. The boy had readily agreed when Allen—whom he had thoroughly bested last year—asked for a rematch. The reason Allen wanted to do this was to gauge how fast someone in Normal Mode could grow. After all, information was a weapon too.

Since October of the previous year, Allen had shifted to hunting Rank C monsters. His kill count over the past six months was over two thousand, making him now Lvl. 28. His stats had gone up quite significantly, but apparently he was still inferior to Mihai in swordsmanship. Every move he tried was handily seen through, evaded, and parried. Mihai was smiling the entire bout, indicating that he was not even trying his best.

Ugh. I've worked so hard on both my levels and Sword Mastery, and I still can't win. At least, not when I have twenty Grass E cards in stock.

For each single point of XP in Normal Mode, Hell Mode required a hundred. The curriculum at the Academy likely placed a lot of emphasis on helping students raise both their base and skill levels. Regardless of the details, their methods were effective. And as someone who needed a hundred times more XP to level up, Allen keenly felt how the gap between him and Mihai had opened up even more compared to last year.

The baron, baroness, Thomas, and Cecil had all gathered to spectate. Despite being the one who had requested the match, Allen lost quite quickly. Just like last time, his sword was knocked out of his hand, signaling the end.

"How wonderful! Master Mihai, you have grown yet even more skillful."

In accordance with Mihai's request, Captain Zenof had started calling him "Master" instead of "Young Master."

"Thank you, Zenof. Allen, you have grown a lot as well."

"No, no, I still have a long way to go in comparison to you, milord."

When Allen replied to the praise modestly, the other boy extended a hand as if asking for a handshake. Naturally, Allen accepted it.

He did this also last year. I wonder if it's a custom from the Academy?

"As expected of Cecil's attendant. Allen, take care of my sister."

"Of course, Master. I will serve her to the utmost of my ability."

Mihai smiled, seemingly satisfied with Allen's response.

"Which reminds me, you fought with a murdergalsh, right? How did it go? I want to hear all about it."

I didn't so much fight it as played tag with it. But being chased the entire time sucked; I wish I could've had a turn at being "it."

Wondering which family member had told Mihai about that, Allen asked for permission to tell the story over lunch, as the lunch hour was near. Just as everyone was about to turn and head back indoors, a knight suddenly burst onto the scene.

"U-Urgent report, sir!"

Uh-oh, don't tell me...

A sense of foreboding rose in Allen's chest. The last time a knight had rushed in to give an urgent report was when the murdergalsh had shown up. Was the game of death tag about to begin anew?

"Mm?" The knight captain stepped up to his subordinate. "Speak."

"Yes, sir! The white dragon has moved, sir!"

The baron cut in, his tone ecstatic. "Is that true?! Where?! Where has it moved to?!"

Zenof said, "Your Lordship, considering the time, how about we head inside to hear the details?"

What?! I wanna hear all about the white dragon's movement too!

Allen was worried that the conversation would be moved to the conference room, but everyone headed to the dining room instead. He followed along happily, as this meant he would be allowed to hear the details as well.

In the year and a half he had served at the Granvelle mansion, Allen had seen multiple people bring in important information related to the management of the fiefdom. Depending on the degree of confidentiality of that information, the baron would at times order the room cleared.

Information at this level was for the ears of the baron and his direct family alone. Allen, along with all other servants, would be ordered to leave the room, even if it meant dropping whatever they were in the middle of doing. This had in fact occurred a few times during Allen's service.

Discussions considered even more confidential would not be held in the dining room. The baron, butler, and knight captain would instead gather by themselves in the conference room, which was located next to the baron's study on the third floor. At that time, no would be allowed on the floor, much less near the room.

This time, however, the information was not considered especially sensitive. In this case, everyone who normally served the baron's immediate

family as their personal attendants would also be privy to what was being said. The baron opted to have lunch while receiving the knight's report.

Once everyone was settled, Zenof told the knight, "Continue your report."

"Yes, sir. The adventurer party Silver Fang of the Gale reported finding that the white dragon has disappeared from its lair. They spent three days attempting to trace its tracks to no avail. Then they decided to return to Granvelle City to inform the Adventurer's Guild first thing."

"So, it's finally moved away! It's been so long!" Despite being in the middle of a meal, the baron was so overjoyed that he leaped to his feet with both hands clasped together, quivering. He was the very picture of a man overcome with emotion.

"We intend on requesting that Silver Fang of the Gale continue their search. That is all for my report, sir."

After being dismissed, the knight exited the dining hall. The baron and knight captain promptly burst into discussion.

"I have been dreaming of this day for so long. Zenof, send men to confirm the state of the mithril mines."

"Of course, my lord! However, we still do not know *where* the white dragon is. Should we not first prioritize confirming the location of its new lair?"

"Mm, I hear you. However, mithril mining is a duty of our realm. We must find out what has become of the mines as soon as possible."

The two seemed to be having trouble seeing eye to eye. On one hand, the knight captain wished to prioritize locating the white dragon, whereas on the other, the baron wanted to reopen the mines that had lain dormant for over a hundred years with haste.

Mihai joined the conversation, his interest piqued. "Does this mean all the monsters between the city and mines need to be cleared?"

"Indeed, Master Mihai," Zenof replied. "Once we are able to confirm that the white dragon has completely left our realm, we will need to immediately begin securing the four mines and the surrounding areas."

"I still have a bit of time here. I'll help out."

"I'm afraid I cannot allow that, Master Mihai, as the white dragon may still be out there somewhere. Your safety is of utmost importance to us."

The reason the knight captain had turned down Mihai's offer to join the investigative effort was because he had determined that at his current strength, even Mihai would be in danger should he encounter the white dragon.

If I remember correctly, there are goblin and orc villages at the foot of the mountains.

Allen recalled what he had heard from Raven while listening to the ongoing conversation. The foothills of the White Dragon Mountains were supposedly covered in thick forestland and dotted with villages built up by goblins and orcs. Allen faintly remembered spotting something that might

have fit that description when he was running away from the murdergalsh. Raven had also said that within those settlements were variant monsters that were a rank higher than their counterparts—that meant Rank C goblins and Rank B orcs.

As these superior species had much higher reproductive capabilities, villages with them would eventually overflow. The surplus population would then move from the mountain foothills toward Granvelle City or assault human villages and travelers. If the monsters got too numerous and caused too much damage, the chivalric order would have to be mobilized to fight them alongside the adventurers.

The area beyond the tree line farther up the mountain was supposedly filled with armored ant nests. Within these nests dwelled countless armored ants and, of course, individuals of the superior species: queen armored ants.

I see. So, the chivalric order might be dispatched to wipe out the goblin and orc villages. Well, I can't have them beating me to the punch.

Allen was resolute to not allow the knights "steal" what he saw as "his" XP.

Through the investigation carried out over the next few months, it was confirmed that the white dragon had moved to the Carnel side of the White Dragon Mountains.

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Time passed after Mihai's return to Academy City, and it was now early July. Allen was currently somewhere farther than a day's walk from Granvelle City.

Okay, I'm far from town and my MP is full. Today's gonna be dedicated entirely to testing and analysis!

Just the other day, Allen had finally reached Summoning Lvl. 5. This morning, he had not converted his MP to Skill XP as usual; instead, he planned on spending the whole day exploring every new thing he had obtained.

As level-up messages would disappear from the log after a certain period of time, he had hurriedly copied it down on one of the Memo pages. He now turned to that page to read over the message once more.

<The Skill XP of Synthesis has reached 1,000,000/1,000,000. Synthesis has reached Lvl. 5. Summoning has reached Lvl. 5. Expansion has reached Lvl. 4. You have obtained Sharing.>

Allen flipped to the page with his Status. So, the new skill that I gained from this level-up is Sharing.

Name: Allen
Age: 9
Class: Summoner
Level: 30

HP: 688 (765) + 140
MP: 1,062 (1,180) + 200
Attack: 374 (416) + 140
Endurance: 374 (416) + 20
Agility: 701 (779) + 60
Intelligence: 1,071 (1,190) + 40
Luck: 609 (779) + 200

Skills: Summoning {5}, Creation {5}, Synthesis {5}, Strengthening {5}, Expansion {4}, Storage, Sharing, Deletion, Sword Mastery {3}, Throwing {3}
XP: 2,516,810/3,000,000

Skill LevelsSummoning: 5
Creation: 5
Synthesis: 5
Strengthening: 5

Skill ExperienceCreation: 10/10,000,000
Synthesis: 0/10,000,000
Strengthening: 680/10,000,000

Creatable SummonsInsect: D, E, F, G, H
Beast: D, E, F, G, H
Bird: D, E, F, G
Grass: D, E, F
Stone: D, E
???: D

HolderInsect: E x 2
Beast: E x 14
Bird: E x 4
Grass: E x 20
Stone:
???:

This level-up took me over two years, and I'm gonna need 30,000,000 Skill XP for the next one. The numbers are starting to get out of hand.

Naturally, Allen left a record whenever he leveled up. In a way, this was an album of the major milestones in his path as a Summoner.

Record of Level-Ups

- 1 year & 0 months old: Obtained grimoire, Summoning Lvl. 1, gained access to Rank H Summons
- 1 year & 10 months old: Summoning Lvl. 2, obtained Synthesis
- 3 years & 0 months old: Gained access to Rank G Summons
- 5 years & 11 months old: Summoning Lvl. 3, obtained Strengthening, gained access to Rank F Summons
- 7 years & 9 months old: Summoning Lvl. 4, obtained Storage, gained access to Rank E Summons
- 9 years & 10 months old: Summoning Lvl. 5, obtained Sharing, gained access to Rank D Summons

Well then, let's start with checking the holders. Expansion leveled up, which means there should be fifty pockets now, right?

Each level-up of the Expansion skill so far had given Allen ten more pockets to store cards in. The last level-up had put him at forty slots, so he expected to now have fifty slots.

Mm, just as I thought. Fifty. This is gonna boost my stats quite a lot.

Since Expansion leveled up every time Summoning did, Allen did not feel particularly moved by it anymore. However, access to ten more storage slots and cards one rank higher meant that his maximum stat boosts had shot up considerably.

Next thing... Hm, I should go over the new skill first, and then take my time with the Rank D Summons.

Six Summons had been added under Rank D. It would presumably take some time to go through them all, so Allen decided to first examine Sharing, which he could likely get out of the way faster.

First of all, it doesn't seem to be a skill that makes my Summons stronger, so this is something completely distinct from Strengthening.

Allen had been gradually increasing the rank of the monsters he hunted. His main targets at the moment were Rank C, but he wanted to move on to Rank B monsters as soon as possible. The reason for this was because, as his level continued going up, the amount of XP that he needed for successive level-ups rose in tandem. In order to reach Lvl. 31, he now needed 3,000,000 XP. That meant two thousand orcs, even though he could only find forty or fifty of them after one full day of running around. It was obvious that in order to earn higher XP values, he needed to kill higher-ranked monsters. To make matters worse, it was getting harder and harder to find orcs around these parts, most likely because he had more or less culled their population.

Storage ended up being a pretty incredible skill too, so I think I can get my hopes up for Sharing, right? Hmm, based on the name, I imagine it enables me to share something with my Summons? Hawkins, come out.

"Pii!"

Allen called out one Bird E to test on.

Okay... Sharing!

Without hesitation, he activated the new skill.

"Huh?! It's...me?!"

Suddenly Allen found himself staring at...himself. There were a few mirrors in the Granvelle mansion, including a big one in the servants' dining hall for anyone who wanted to fix their appearance in a hurry. Ever since becoming a manservant, Allen had picked up the habit of examining his entire figure in a mirror. And that was exactly what he felt like he was doing right now.

Ohhhhh! This is Hawkins's field of view! So I'm seeing what it's seeing!

In short, the Sharing skill enabled Allen to, well, *share* his Summons' eyes.

What's this? It doesn't feel strange at all, even though I'm seeing both Hawkins's and my field of view at the same time. Hawkins, look around in several directions.

Just because Allen was seeing what Hawkins was seeing, it did not mean his own vision was obscured. For Allen, the fact that this did not feel strange at all was strange in and of itself. The Bird E moved its head to look all around.

Hmm, I can still see both fields of view just fine even when Hawkins is moving a lot.

The activation of this skill did not place any extra burden on Allen's sense of sight whatsoever; it did not even feel unnatural, let alone make him dizzy. He could see *and* comprehend two fields of view at the same time with no issues at all.

All right, Hawkins, fly up!

The Bird E flapped its wings and soared into the sky. When it stopped to look back down, Allen was able to see the land spread out below. The horizon that he had been unable to see before due to all the trees now lay clearly in view.

Th-This is incredible! What a moving sight! Hawkins, try flying a little.

Just as ordered, Hawkins started flying forward slowly, with Allen still seeing through its eyes.

Just amazing! What even is this? Oh, right, Hawkins, use Hawk Eye—WHOOAA! Are you serious?! I can even Share what it sees when it's using its Ability!

When Allen ordered Hawkins to activate its Ability, Hawk Eye, he found his vision opening up even farther, reaching several kilometers into the distance. Bird E's capability to spot anything that moved within a radius of several kilometers was conveyed directly to Allen's eyes.

It almost feels like I took over Hawkins's body. Hold on, when I'm in this state, can I give it instructions even farther than fifty meters away?

When one fact was revealed, another question popped up. Up until this point, Allen had only been able to give instructions to his Summons if they were within a fifty meter radius of him. He now wanted to test how far he could continue giving instructions to a Summon when Sharing its sight.

Upon being commanded to do so, the Bird E flew on until it was more than fifty meters away from Allen's position.

Okay, that's enough. Now, stop using Hawk Eye.

As soon as he gave the order, Allen found his sight through Hawkins's eyes returning to normal. In other words, he had successfully given it an instruction that it obeyed from more than fifty meters away. What's more, the link through Sharing was still going strong, entirely unaffected by the distance. In his excitement, Allen continued giving the Summon various orders, making it fly circles, swoop low, do barrel rolls, and everything else he could think of. Bird E carried everything out while staying over fifty meters away.

Allen now had a way to directly give his Summons instructions regardless of distance.

"This is basically multiboxing! No, this is even better!"

Allen was so excited that he ended up shouting out loud. He recognized the basic concept behind this Sharing skill. Back when he was Kenichi, he had controlled two characters at the same time when playing a game before. This was called "multiboxing." There were even some game companies that recommended this playstyle, as players had to pay a monthly subscription fee for each and every account they played on.

That naturally led to the question of why someone would go so far as to pay the subscription fee twice, thrice, or even more times on top of buying more game consoles and additional monitors in order to multibox. The answer was simple: since it was still the same person behind all the different characters, so they could keep all the drops. What was more, doing this also saved the time that would normally be required to find party members.

In order to multibox, Kenichi had indeed purchased multiple monitors and consoles. Allen still remembered how it felt playing two characters at the same time, the rush of busily looking between two screens and desperately manipulating two controllers.

His current situation was a huge upgrade compared to the past. He could see and comprehend both his and Hawkins's sight at the same time. Even though he was seeing the sky and the ground at the same time, it did not feel awkward in the slightest.

"I see, so this is the effect of Sharing. Hm? Wait, is this even more incredible than I'd thought?"

A certain possibility popped up into Allen's mind, suggesting a massive change to what he was capable of as a Summoner.

Can I use Sharing to make my Summons hunt far away from where I am? Can I make a hunting party composed solely of my Summons?

Currently, Allen needed to run throughout the entire forest to do his hunting. As soon as his Bird Es would find a target, he would then run over to kill it. Rinse and repeat. The fact that he could give his Summons instructions from farther than fifty meters away using the Sharing skill

opened up the possibility of hunting without him having to do all that running around. What's more, Summons could remain Summoned for thirty days. If they could operate independently with no distance limitations, then Allen could continue hunting even when he was back at the mansion. This would be a complete game changer for his leveling up.

Before I get ahead of myself, let's first check how many Summons I can Share with at the same time. Hawkins, come out.

Three more Bird Es appeared before Allen. He activated Share with all of them. Now, he was looking at a total of five fields of vision, including his own.

So, no problems Sharing with four at once. Honestly, how do I not feel strange about seeing five things at the same time?

In his previous life, Allen's limit for multiboxing was only two characters, though he had heard of masters who could control four. Now, however, he was feeling no strain at all from using the Sharing skill. He was seeing five fields of vision as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

Honestly, this is less multiboxing and more parallel thinking. All right, I don't have any more Hawkinses in store, so, Tama, come out.

Allen Shared the sight of each Summon that came out in turn. But then…

"AAARRRGHHHHH!"

Right after Sharing with the sixth Summon, Allen's head became racked by a terrible pain. It was so bad that he crumpled to the ground, clutching his skull. He disabled the sixth Sharing link in a fluster.

Huh? The headache's gone. Oh man, I thought I was gonna die. So, Sharing can be disabled. I got a really bad headache with the sixth one. Does it mean the limit for Sharing is five? Is it five within the same rank?

Although the pain scared him, Allen saw the need to confirm how many Summons he could Share with at the same time. He Deleted an Insect E card, then apprehensively Created and Summoned an Insect G card.

All right, here goes. Share with Hopp— ARGH!

A severe headache struck Allen once more when he attempted to Share with Insect E as the sixth Summon.

Is five just a flat limit regardless of rank? Why is that?

Along with Summoning's recent level-up, Allen could now call out a total of fifty Summons at any given moment. It would be an incredible pity if he could only Share with five of them. He pondered why five was the limit for Sharing. Since he did not have enough information, he took another look at his own Status.

Just like Storage, Sharing can't be leveled up. At first glance, it might seem like this skill has no potential for improvement and that the limit will stay at five permanently. The thing is, I don't understand why the limit was set at five. What could be the reason?

The gears in Allen's mind continued turning. Was this skill arbitrarily capped at five, or was there a certain condition that limited him to five for now? If it was due to a condition, then what was it?

Would it go up if I leveled up more? I'm Lvl. 31 right now. Is it, like, I can Share with another Summon every six levels? What else? Wait a minute...is this where Intelligence comes in?!

The moment Allen saw the Intelligence field on his Status, an epiphany came to him. That stat was currently 1,075 including the boosts from his cards. Perhaps *this* was the condition that determined how many he could Share with concurrently. This was a theory he could test without having to level up.

If Intelligence really is the condition, it would mean every 200 points in Intelligence enables me to Share with another Summon. Let's try raising the stat. Ah, might as well do it with Rank D Summons.

Since he had more slots and access to Rank D Summons, Allen decided to Create a few Bird D cards with the aim of bringing his Intelligence up to 1,200. If his hypothesis was correct, this should enable him to Share with a sixth Summon.

All right, I've got 1,200 Intelligence now.

Thanks to the buffs from the Bird D cards, Allen had reached the number he wanted. The Hopper that he had Summoned earlier was still there, right next to him.

Okay. Hopper, Share.

Allen had braced himself, ready to disable Sharing right away if he got another terrible headache. However, this worry turned out to be unwarranted. He found himself seeing a perspective barely an inch higher than the ground, the lowest that he had ever been situated.

"Hell yeah! The sixth Share worked! It really *is* Intelligence! Sharing is tied to Intelligence! And it really is 200 Intelligence for each Share!"

There were few things as moving as proving one's own hypothesis. Allen whooped from the sense of achievement that washed over him. About an hour later, he had figured out almost everything there was to know about the skill.

- Does not cost MP to use
- Can Share with one additional Summon per 200 Intelligence
- Shares consciousness with a Summon; can instruct it to use its Ability or carry out other commands
- Cannot command another Summon through a Shared Summon
- The only senses that can be Shared are sight and sound (taste has not been tested)
- The Summon has to be within 50 meters to activate Sharing
- Sharing can be disabled even when the Summon is farther than 50 meters away
- Summons with under 100 Intelligence cannot perceive instructions even while Shared

- Shared Summons can be returned to card form from farther than 50 meters away
- When a Summon is returned to card form from over 50 meters away, the card automatically reappears in a slot

And I think that's about it. So I'm not personally controlling the Summons, only giving them instructions. I don't actually take over their bodies.

As Allen was only instructing the Summons he was Sharing with, there was a small time lag between him giving orders and the Summons carrying those orders out. His theory was that in order to shorten this lag, he had to consciously visualize what it was that he wanted the Summon to do.

And last note to add to the list: I still get the XP when my Summons kill monsters more than fifty meters away from me.

Allen had set up an impromptu squad of Summons and had them go kill a monster. As a result, his XP had gone up. He now knew that his plan to farm XP remotely could actually be realized.

I see, so this is the reason the Summoning class has such high Intelligence.

Last year in November, Allen had received a lesson with Cecil's magic tutor as a reward for his first year of service. At the time, he had been absolutely crushed to find out that he could not use magic. As it turned out, however, there was indeed a startling reason behind why his class had Rank S Intelligence.

In the video games that Allen had played as Kenichi, most magic-using classes relied on stats like Intelligence and Wisdom. In line with this, he had learned from his lesson with the tutor that using magic in this world required memorizing a countless number of very complicated symbols. This was a feat that would be impossible for a normal person, equally impossible as Allen instantaneously processing information from multiple fields of view. It was the Intelligence stat that made such impossibilities possible. Allen now finally understood the importance of Intelligence in this world.

I'll need more time to work out the kind of things I can do using Sharing. All right, let's move on to examining the Rank D Summons now. I've got a shit ton of Rank D magic stones, so let's get through this pronto.

Thanks to Sharing, Allen felt the scope of his powers as a Summoner practically blown wide open. Now he was moving on to discovering what his new Summons could do.

Chapter 8: Rank D Summons

Even though Allen had started in the morning, it had taken so long to analyze his new skill that the sun had already passed its zenith before he knew it. So, he got out his lunch of dried potato and molmo to fill his stomach.

After his experience of being chased by the murdergalsh, Allen had packed a months' worth of dried potato, meat jerky, and molmo as rations inside Storage, together with equipment for camping out, such as a blanket, a fire-starting magic tool, and torches. These were just in case he ever found himself once again unable to return to town for a few days. As time was stopped inside Storage, the food he put inside would not rot. The torches could also enter Storage already lit, so he put a few of those inside just in case the others went out. This might have rendered his fire-starting magic tool moot, but it never hurt to be extra prepared.

Then again, I have more than ten thousand Rank D magic stones, so I think I'll be able to go through the new Summons at a pretty quick pace.

After he finished eating, Allen called out all of the Rank D Summons. Then he checked the information on their cards.

Status of Insect D (Spider) Type: Insect
Rank: D
Name: Spidey
HP: 120
MP: 0
Attack: 140
Endurance: 200
Agility: 200
Intelligence: 125
Luck: 60
Buffs: Endurance 20, Agility 20
Ability: Spider Silk

Status of Beast D (Bear)
Type: Beast
Rank: D
Name: Teddy
HP: 200
MP: 0
Attack: 200
Endurance: 128
Agility: 80
Intelligence: 130

Luck: 60
Buffs: HP 20, Attack 20
Ability: Crush

Status of Bird D (Owl)
Type: Bird
Rank: D
Name: Horo
HP: 76
MP: 0
Attack: 83
Endurance: 67
Agility: 200
Intelligence: 200
Luck: 160
Buffs: Agility 20, Intelligence 20
Ability: Night Vision

Status of Grass D (Potato)
Type: Grass
Rank: D
Name: Tater
HP: 50
MP: 200
Attack: 40
Endurance: 35
Agility: 40
Intelligence: 60
Luck: 200
Buffs: MP 20, Luck 20
Ability: Crop of Magic

Status of Stone D (Bronze Statue)
Type: Stone
Rank: D
Name: Bron
HP: 200
MP: 0
Attack: 180
Endurance: 200
Agility: 100
Intelligence: 140
Luck: 108

Buffs: HP 20, Endurance 20
Ability: Defend

Status of Fish D (Salmon)
Type: Fish
Rank: D
Name: Belly
HP: 80
MP: 200
Attack: 54
Endurance: 34
Agility: 160
Intelligence: 200
Luck: 170
Buffs: MP 20, Intelligence 20
Ability: Splash

As a result of his testing, two armored ants now lay dead in front of Allen. The huge cracks in their salad bowl-like armor were leaking bodily fluids. Before them stood a brown Summon that looked like a grizzly bear roughly two and a half meters in length. It looked pretty proud of itself for having beaten the armored ants. This bear was none other than Teddy, the Beast D Summon.

Next to Teddy stood a giant spider that was one and a half meters long and sixty centimeters tall. This black form had both its front legs raised in the air as it continued hissing intimidatingly at the dead armored ants. This was Spidey, the Insect D Summon.

Nice, nice, so Teddy's Ability, Crush, can break through an armored ant's shell. It's not quite enough to kill the monster in one strike, but that's where Spidey comes in.

The monsters with broken armor were tied up with sticky white strands. Insect D's Ability, Spider Silk, enabled it to produce highly adhesive thread from the tip of its abdomen that was useful for tying enemies up, slowing them down, or stopping them in their tracks—or just messing with them in general.

Just like the other Summons in their respective categories, the Beast D Summon was specced for offense and the Insect D Summon for debuffs. These two were going to be the backbone of Allen's hunting efforts going forward. Thankfully, both of them had over 100 Intelligence right out of the gate.

Allen next looked up at an owl with a maximum wingspan of over one and a half meters that was perched on a tree. This Bird D Summon returned his gaze with its large, round eyes.

There's no way to test Horo's Ability right now, but based on the name, Night Vision likely allows it to see in the dark. Hawkins can only scout during daytime, and now I have Horo to do the same at night. Hawk Eye in the day and Night Vision at night sounds about right.

While hoping that the effect of Bird D's Ability was indeed as its name suggested, Allen made a mental note to test it out after sunset. He then turned to look at the strange figure at his feet that looked like a potato with hands and legs. This was Tater, the Grass D Summon.

Just like Grass F and Grass E, Grass D also turned out to be a Summon with a one-use Ability that turned it into a recovery item. The Ability name, Crop of Magic, suggested that it was an MP recovery item. Sure enough, when he gave the Japanese plum-sized berry a try after depleting his MP, the fruit disappeared from his hand and restored 1,000 MP.

Allen finally had access to a method of recovering his MP, which was absolutely crucial for raising his skill levels. He now needed 30,000,000 Skill XP to reach Summoning Lvl. 6. He therefore decided to dedicate all his naturally recovering MP toward Skill XP, and to keep Crops of Magic inside Storage for battles where he might suddenly need MP. Thanks to having more than ten thousand magic stones, he would never run entirely out of MP for the foreseeable future. This way, he was more than equipped to cope if suddenly attacked by powerful opponents.

Now I have access to all the MP I'll need if the murdergalsh ever comes after me again.

Beside Allen stood what looked like a two-meter-tall suit of European armor made of bronze. This large-bodied Summon carried a shield as tall as itself.

Now, Bron. I never did get around to using Wally, the Stone E Summon. But still, even a bronze statue can be classified as a Stone type, huh? The gods of this world sure are broad-minded.

The way Allen hunted mainly consisted of scouting out new monsters and staying on the move at the same time, a style referred to as "chaining" in his previous life. This was the opposite of lying in wait for enemies to approach—conversely called "camping"—so he had not had any opportunity to use the Stone E Summon. He had not even kept copies in the card holders. How to use the Stone Summons without changing his hunting style was a question that he would have to tackle going forward.

And that's it for the analysis of the new Summons in the preexisting categories. That leaves Belly, which boosts my MP and Intelligence. I do appreciate the Intelligence, as it helps me Share with more Summons. But...hmm, a fish, huh? Making a single one of these cards burns through fifteen magic stones. In that sense, Insect and Beast cards are great for only

costing one magic stone. They provide me with Attack, Agility, and HP buffs, so it really is great that I got them early on.

The Creation and Synthesis process for Summons at Rank E and higher all required magic stones; the more complicated the Synthesis process, the more magic stones needed. The Fish card required multiple rounds of Synthesis, ultimately bringing its cost to fifteen magic stones.

Cost in Magic Stones

- Insect: 1
- Beast: 1
- Bird: 3
- Grass: 5
- Stone: 9
- Fish: 15

Well then, let's try calling it out. Belly.

When Allen called a Fish D out to analyze it, a salmon appeared, looking exactly like the illustration on its card. The meter-long fish flopped about on the ground.

"For some reason, it looks like the most useless of all the Summons I've seen so far. It's starting to remind me of Denka."

Allen could hardly be faulted for his doubt; the latest Summon that he had finally obtained after more than two years of effort turned out to be a creature that could not even move around properly. This was the very illustration of the phrase "fish on a chopping block."

Well, how about I first see its Ability in action? Belly, Splash.

Immediately, the fish sank underground, leaving only its back and dorsal fin visible. It then flapped furiously, scattering shining droplets all over. Some of it got onto Allen, who was then enveloped in a faint glow that quickly faded away.

“Whoa! It dove *into* the ground! Wait, I’m glowing?! Or...not. It went away. What did it do, though?” Allen checked his Status in his grimoire and gasped in surprise. “I got a Status buff!”

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Name: Allen (Increased Physical & Magic Evasion)
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Right beside his name was a brand new field indicating that he now had increased evasion against both physical and magic attacks.

So the Fish cards give Status buffs. I did see some of the spray landing on the other Summons too just now. So this Ability doesn’t just work on me but on all Summons too... Ah, is the effective radius fifty meters?

Allen had noticed the other Summons glow when Belly used its Ability. That even included Horo, which was still up in its tree, indicating that the effect of this Ability reached quite far. Since the range for almost everything related to his class was fifty meters, Allen assumed it was the same here as well.

This is definitely helpful. Hopefully this’ll lower the number of Summons that get killed in battle and, by extension, lower the number of magic stones that I have to use to replace them. I should confirm how long the effect of this Ability lasts.

Allen continued analyzing what the newly added Fish-type Summon brought to the table, musing over how it could expand the options available to him in battle.

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“Phew! That was another fun day of hunting.”

It was now 4 p.m. and Allen was wrapping up another day of hunting. He was about to turn back and start looking for edible prey to bring home.

Currently before him lay the corpse of an armored ant whose head had been caved in by a Teddy. After learning that he could safely kill armored ants with the power of the Beast D Summons last time, he had shifted from only hunting orcs to hunting armored ants as well. According to what he saw through Hawk Eye from Sharing with Hawkins—he now valued Sharing very much for enabling him to practically scout in person—there were many more armored ants than orcs in the vicinity. Thinking about it, it made sense that ants reproduced at a higher rate than pigs did.

Now then, I’ve gotten permission from Sebas, so let’s bring this back too.

Allen flipped over the armored ant with the crushed head and swiftly used his mithril sword to separate the armor from the rest of the body. Naturally, he remembered to fetch the magic stone as well.

Until recently, he had prioritized only the hunting aspect and therefore had not brought back any materials from the monsters he killed. After all, it would take two to three hours to go to a shop where he could sell everything, and the shop was quite a distance from the mansion as well. He

much rather preferred spending that time hunting. In his eyes, XP was worth far more than gold.

However, now that he had reached Summoning Lvl. 5 and could kill armored ants without much trouble, his way of thinking had changed a little. First, it occurred to him that he could use an armored ant's armor instead of a shoulder basket to carry the beasts that he was bringing back for meat. Consequently, he now instructed his Summons to aim for the head and not the body when fighting armored ants. After that, he learned that this armor could be sold for one gold apiece. The unit price was extremely high *and* it was convenient for carrying meat back with. And so he had decided to bring one back with him every time he went hunting.

Allen had also asked Sebas whether he could sell these pieces of armor to an armorer. The baron's family could buy them off him too, except that the family had no use for them. So Sebas had given Allen the go ahead.

Then Allen came up with the idea to ask one of his fellow servants to bring the armored ant shells to an armorer and sell them on his behalf. When he explained that he intended on letting whoever helped him keep the proceeds from one piece of armor for every ten that they sold for him, Sebas also gave this the green light, saying that many of the servants would be more than happy to take on the task. This was how Allen managed to save himself the time needed to visit the armorer's.

All right, done with the butchering. Let's get started, then.

Just because the day was ending, it did not mean that Allen's hunting was over. Thanks to the thirty Fish D cards he now kept in his holders, his Intelligence was over 1,600. As Sharing with one Summon required 200 Intelligence, he could now Share with eight Summons at a time. What's more, he had done a little more testing and confirmed that Night Vision did indeed serve as a scouting Ability for use at night—just that it could not see behind obstacles—and that the duration of the effect of Splash lasted for twenty-four hours. Now that he had finished all his preliminary analysis of the Rank D Summons, he was about to attempt sending a group of Summons out into the wild by themselves—while Sharing with them, of course—to hunt remotely.

If possible, I'd like to form two squads, but that would mean there being only four Summons in each squad. It's probably better to keep them all together in one larger party of eight.

The group was composed of one Insect D, four Beast Ds, one Bird E, one Bird D, and one Fish D. The most important thing about having Summons fight on their own was ensuring that none of them died. Allen was too far away to replenish their numbers, so a death would mean a permanent decrease to the party's fighting power. This was why including an Insect D and a Fish D for their effects was absolutely crucial. Bird E and Bird D would serve as the group's scouts in the daytime and nighttime, respectively. Naturally, the bulk of the fighting would be left to the Beast Ds. It was also their duty to protect the other Summons.

Yep, these numbers should be more than enough to handle Rank C monsters. Guys, off you go. Make sure you don't attack other adventurers!

The most important thing to the Summons Squad this time was not how many monsters they could kill, but how well they could avoid hurting other adventurers. Allen knew they would fully obey the instructions he gave them, but just in case, he stressed again that they were not to retaliate even if under attack by said adventurers.

Allen had also given Bird E and Bird D specific instructions to steer clear of adventurers. The reason he went to the extra trouble was because he would be sleeping at night. Sharing could still be maintained while he slept, but he naturally would not be able to give instructions should a situation crop up. During that time, the Summons would have to move at their own discretion. This was why Allen had been extremely thorough with the warnings he left with them.

There was one more thing that Allen was quite sure of but had yet to properly confirm: the duration of Sharing was very likely thirty days, the same length of time that Summons could remain Summoned. Going to sleep with it active felt like falling asleep in front of the computer while gaming in his previous life—he could still hear the sounds coming in through the feeds.

Even while returning to town, Allen continued monitoring and giving instructions to the eight Summons. When doing so, he did not have to instruct each one separately; no, he was capable of instructing all of them at once. The reason he could watch from eight pairs of eyes, comprehend all eight Summons' movements and relative positioning, keep in mind the details of their Abilities, and send them instructions all at the same time was likely entirely due to the boon of 1,600 Intelligence.

It was currently still Bird E's turn at scouting. Once it got a bit darker, it would be time for Bird D to take over.

Gotta find monsters to kill first. Let's start with a small group.

Thanks to Sharing, Allen had only just learned that, just like Night Vision, Hawk Eye also could not see behind obstacles. A quick pan around with it revealed a pair of orcs three kilometers ahead.

Perfect timing.

The discovery was instantaneously passed on to the other seven Summons, which promptly began making their way over toward the monsters. Thanks to obtaining Sharing, the speed at which Allen could convey information had improved drastically. Because he could directly see what his Summons were seeing, even when they were using their Abilities, he could give them much more specific instructions that were tailored to their situations. The entire process had become incredibly streamlined.

As the orcs' position was in an area where plant growth was sparse, they could clearly see the seven Summons approaching. Both sides shifted into battle readiness as the two groups approached each other.

When they got close enough, Insect D used Spider Silk to tie up the two charging orcs. Then the Beast Ds followed up with Crush, killing them off before they could do anything.

<You have defeated 1 orc. You have earned 1,500 XP.>
<You have defeated 1 orc. You have earned 1,500 XP.>

Heh heh heh, that was a piece of cake. The Summons are a bit slow on foot, but I can deal with it.

Allen personally had much higher Agility than the Rank D Summons. Although he was slightly dissatisfied with their speed, the hunt continued.

I do also have to focus on helping the Summons so they can get used to doing this.

When a new Summon was born, it inherited all memories and experiences from those of the same type and rank that had lived before. Having the members of this Summons Squad learn the intricacies of hunting as a group was also an important goal of this initiative.

The next morning, Allen awoke to find that his XP had not gone up at all, even though the log on his grimoire was filled with records of the monsters that had been killed by the Summons Squad. In other words, while he was asleep, the monsters were practically only polishing their individual skills without any benefits coming back to Allen himself. He felt a warm feeling bubbling up inside his chest after learning that what amounted to AFK gaming did not work in this world.

He made a memo, then decided to do more analysis of the conditions for gaining XP.

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Several days later, Allen was attempting something new using Sharing. The scene for the day's experiment was to be Krena Village. He was currently viewing the nostalgic landscape of his home village through the eyes of Chappy, the Bird G Summon that looked like a parrot. A distance that required five days on foot for a normal human being had only taken the Strengthened Bird G several hours.

"I am Krena the knight! Here I come!"

"Ready!"

Krena and Dogora just happened to be starting a new match. After almost two years, their fights were no longer on the level of "play." Dogora's dad, the village weapons merchant and blacksmith, had probably been the one who forged the iron sword and ax the two children were using. The sound of weapons clashing resonated louder than ever.

At the same time, a slight distance away, Mash and Pelomas were playing knight together using wooden swords. It had been so long since he had been back that Allen could not help but have Chappy perch on a tree so that he could watch this scene longer.

Ah, no, I have something I want to pass on.

After confirming how much his friends had grown, Allen moved on from Krena's house to that of his own family. Theresia was in the earthen-floored room.

It's mother! And wow, Myulla's grown so big!

Bird G managed to infiltrate the house without being spotted by Theresia. A lump rose in Allen's throat as he gazed at her through Chappy's eyes. It had been less than two years since he left, but it felt like it had been ten.

Clink.

"Huh?"

The sound of a metallic noise prompted Theresia to turn around. Chappy was already gone. Instead, only a single gold coin lay on the ground

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October rolled around, and Allen turned ten. This meant he had been working at the Granvelle mansion for two full years. In the beginning, he had only planned on staying for two to three years before telling Sebas that the job did not suit him after all and then heading home. Even now, he still did plan on eventually leaving—specifically, once he turned twelve—but he had gotten much more involved with the Granvelle family during these past two years than originally expected. The thought that he would have to part with them after another two years spurred him to carry out his duties as a manservant as best he could.

This morning, as always, Allen had breakfast while chatting with Rickel, the head manservant. The fact that Allen had turned ten meant that Rickel was now twenty. When Allen talked about how it had been two years since he first came to work at the mansion, Rickel proudly said he was in his twelfth year. He was a true veteran by now, having served as a houseboy several years before becoming a manservant. He was always a good sport about the topics Allen brought up.

The details of Allen's work as Cecil's personal manservant had also changed somewhat. Now that Cecil was ten years old, her wild tendencies that were characteristic of children had faded quite a bit. Consequently, she sent Allen out for errands far less frequently now. Her personality remained pretty much the same, though.

Something else that had changed was Allen's salary: his pay as a huntsman was being raised to one gold each month starting today. Together with the one gold he earned as a manservant, his total monthly salary would be two gold going forward. He had surpassed the pay rate of the head manservant.

Today was also the day that Captain Zenof would be returning from an expedition to inspect the state of the mithril mines in the White Dragon Mountains. Allen fervently prayed that the report would be delivered in the dining hall and not the conference room. Perhaps a god had been listening, for his prayer came true. Allen would be present in the dining hall and was grateful for the opportunity to hear the details of Zenof's findings.

And so lunchtime arrived. Allen kept an ear constantly fixed on the conversation while serving.

"So, what's the state of the mithril mines?" the baron asked, wasting no time.

When he learned back in March that the white dragon had moved to Carnel, he had immediately ordered a situational analysis. Apparently the baron was in a hurry to get the mithril mining restarted. Allen wondered if his frugal living conditions were spurring him to seek the profits promised by mithril mining.

"Yes, my lord. Currently..."

When the report then began, the baron was sitting on the edge of his seat. As expected, the tunnels that had been abandoned in disuse for over a hundred years had turned into monster nests. The expedition had confirmed the presence of numerous goblin and orc villages as well as armored ant nests at the foothills of the White Dragon Mountains. A frown came over the baron's face as he listened attentively.

"What about the transport roads?"

Merely killing off the monsters in the mines would not be enough, as there were also transport roads and facilities with blast furnaces necessary for processing mithril ore that needed to be kept safe. A rather sizable area would require a constant protective presence, which explained why the investigation had taken more than half a year.

According to the knight captain, many of the sites that used to be village housing for laborers involved with processing ore had now become breeding grounds for monsters. Similarly, many of the roads that connected those sites to Granvelle City were also swarming with them.

"So, how long would it actually take to wipe out all those monsters and restart mining operations?" This was the all-important question.

"Five years at the earliest, my lord. We would also need to gather miners and people to man the furnaces, so I'm afraid it could take even longer. Taking into account the time needed to rebuild the villages they would be living in, we may be looking at over ten years, my lord," Zenof answered.

Sebas nodded to indicate that his own digging had also given him similar numbers.

However, the baron said, "We cannot wait five whole years. Can we not stagger the opening of the mines in order to get started sooner? For example, we can focus on getting the mine closest to Granvelle City up and running first."

The White Dragon Mountains stretched north to south. The northernmost mine was located roughly the same latitude as Granvelle City, making it the closest. Thus the baron's idea was to slowly clear the mines one by one, starting in the north and moving southward. The point he wanted to make was that there was no need to wait to open all four mines all at once.

"Of course, my lord. Even so, it would take three years."

When he heard that he still had to wait three more years, the baron looked up and closed his eyes. He really was in a rush to get the mines back up and running.

"Th-Three years... I am aware I am pushing quite hard, but please make this happen as soon as possible."

As I'd thought, they really are planning on starting from the north.

As Allen continued serving, he looked directly at the mine in question from high up in the sky using Sharing. He had ordered the Bird E in the Summons Squad to fly over the area and activate Hawk Eye. After confirming the location of this particular mine, he then ordered the Summon to circle around and look for surrounding goblin and orc settlements and armored ant nests.

The butler said, "I will send out a notice to gather those willing to relocate to the mining facilities."

As the talk surrounding the mines themselves concluded, the baron changed topic and asked, "And what is the current situation over in Carnel?"

"According to reports, they attempted to continue mining and ended up angering the white dragon," Zenof replied.

The way he put it, the dragon grew irritated at all the humans scurrying about nearby and so wiped out all the laborers with a breath attack.

Oof. I bet the white dragon probably has something like a superior version of Hawk Eye that enables it to see reeeally far. I'm so glad I never did get around to trying to sneak a peek at it.

Allen had yet to see the white dragon for himself. He could probably manage it by Sharing with a Bird E or Bird D, but he thought better of it. In light of what Hawk Eye could do and what he knew of the dragon's behavior, he determined that it would be too dangerous to make an attempt.

The range of Hawk Eye was several kilometers. At this point, Allen had already realized that the white dragon's new lair was actually closer to some of the Granvelle mines than the Carnel mines. However, whereas the latter were now completely off-limits, there was now no problem developing the former. Why was the monster ignoring distance and only allowing the Granvelle side to use their mines?

The conclusion that Allen came to was that the monster's scouting ability likely could not see through obstacles, just like how Hawk Eye and Night Vision were unable to. The mountain itself served as one huge obstacle, blocking the dragon's perception. That said, the dragon's skill definitely

reached much farther than Hawk Eye. It would be absolutely disastrous if Allen accidentally got too close with Bird E and provoked the dragon into chasing it back to the Granvelle side. He did not want to take this risk just to satisfy his own curiosity.

"Hm, so they did try to continue by force." The baron's expression was clouded.

"Yes, my lord."

"Lord Carnel has been ignoring the Land Reclamation Decree all this time, citing that he has had his hands full with mithril mining."

In other words, Viscount Carnel had been dangling the profits from mithril mining in front of the royal family's face to convince them to permit shirking his duties, basically brute-forcing his way using the power of money. This did sort of make him sound a little crooked.

"We have confirmed that any further mithril mining in his fiefdom is now impossible."

I guess it makes sense that they keep a close eye on their neighbor.

"He still has the wealth he's amassed so far, but I expect him to burn through it next year," the baron said before turning to Sebas. "There's no telling what he might do afterward. He might even try to start something with us. Keep a steady eye on him and remain vigilant."

"Yes, Master."

"And I think you can already tell, but I'm saying this just in case: I have no intention of meeting Lord Carnel again. After all, this isn't something that can be resolved merely through discourse."

The butler bowed to acknowledge his master's command to turn down all future requests for an audience from the Carnel family.

This was apparently the end of the report in the dining hall. The chivalric order would proceed to cull the monster population at the foot of the White Dragon Mountains, starting from the north and sweeping southward. The butler was to send out word to gather miners and laborers while also surveilling the realm of Carnel.

Since development will be starting from the north, I'll also be killing the monsters from the north.

Allen's plan of action going forward was decided. Through Hawk Eye, he had already spotted goblin, orc, and armored ant dwellings that numbered more than a hundred total.

I see. So this is going to be my focus in the coming two years.

A specific goal took shape inside Allen's mind. Before he left the mansion to become an adventurer two years from now, he would clear away all the monsters nested at the foot of the White Dragon Mountains as his way of repaying everything the baron's family had done for him. Since the baron wanted to begin mining mithril as soon as possible, Allen would help him do so. All the monsters in the way must be exterminated.

I'll start with the weakest target: goblin villages.

This was precious XP that Allen was not willing to lose to the chivalric order. He resolved to get to work as soon as possible.

Chapter 9: Promise with Mihai

It was Allen's first day off in October. After hearing the knight captain's report the other day, Allen was now in the foothills of the White Dragon Mountains. Specifically, near the upper edge of the foothills. A few days' walk from there, the angle of the mountain slope suddenly turned steep and the scenery became barren and desolate. Goblin and orc villages filled the forest here, and just a bit further up, armored ants bored directly into the mountain, forever expanding their massive nests.

Today, Allen was going to take on his first goblin village. The chivalric order had planned on assaulting this particular one several days later, so he was here to get ahead of them and grab all the XP before they could. For the immediate future, he would be focusing solely on goblin villages.

Goblin villages were led by goblin kings. They were Rank C monsters, so he did not expect to have any trouble dealing with them. On the other hand, orc villages were led by orc kings, which were Rank B. The memory of the chase-of-death with the murdergalsh was still fresh in Allen's mind, so he knew it was still too early for him to take on orc villages. They could wait until after he had wiped out all the goblin villages and gained all the XP they had to offer.

The armored ant nests would be quite the challenge too. Allen had been told that each nest was home to at least a thousand armored ants, as well as a queen armored ant which was, again, Rank B. Only after every last ant in a nest was killed could it be repurposed for other means. This translated to fighting a thousand ants on their home turf, a feat naturally considered even more dangerous than attacking an orc village. However, there was good reason to go after these nests: there was a possibility that the armored ants had exposed mithril veins while creating their passages. In other words, if the ants were gone, what used to be a terrifying monster nest would become a mine with pre-dug shafts possibly leading to already-exposed mithril ore. In fact, two of the four existent mithril mines used to be armored ant nests.

Allen had found the goblin village that he was currently standing in front of using Bird Es. Even now, several of them were circling about in the sky, providing him a detailed bird's-eye view.

All right, it's time to wipe out every last one of them.

The goblin village was surrounded by a crude fence with a single gate. Manning the gate were two guards.

GO, TEDDYS!

Four Beast Ds burst out from cover and charged at the gate. Of course, they had already been Strengthened *and* buffed with Splash. The two guards were already dead by the time they noticed their assailants. Rank D monsters were hardly a threat to Allen's Summons anymore.

One of the goblins that noticed the attack clambered up a watchtower and started ringing the bell, raising a cacophonous ruckus that served as the background track to four giant bears bursting into the village.

Goblins flooded out of houses made from wooden frames and ragged drapes, but the Teddys made short work of them by using Crush over and over. Some of the goblins smartly took up bows, climbing the walls and watchtowers to make long-range attacks now that it was clear they were disadvantaged in close-quarters combat. However, multiple Insect Ds were already laying in wait, and Spider Silk proved extremely effective against mere goblins.

I want to be able to launch long-range attacks too. None of my current Summons are specced for it, though. Ranged attacks and Area of Effects attacks—that's what I want.

Allen was thankful for getting a Summon type that could cast buffs, but there was truly no beating ranged and AoE attacks when it came to hunting efficiency. He cast a jealous glance at the bows in the hands of the goblins that had been thoroughly trussed up in white strands, then followed his Summons into the village. He stopped right inside the gateway to watch the pitched battle from a safe distance.

There are, what, about two to three hundred goblins in here, I'd estimate. With these numbers, I guess there's bound to be stragglers.

This was Allen's very first attempt at assaulting a goblin village. He was trying to do this with the Summons Squad alone, but it was clear now that they were not enough. His aim was to annihilate every last resident of this settlement, but at this rate, almost half of the goblins were going to get away. A lot more Summons were going to be needed to attack a village, so he was going to have to control them in person.

All right, let's do this quick. Teddys, come out.

Six more Beast Ds appeared, joining the four already in the thick of battle. As the goblins fell by the dozens, a few started retreating toward the back of the village. At that moment, however, ten more Beast Ds burst into the village from the rear. Allen had positioned them there ahead of time and told them to come in as soon as the village bell started ringing. The goblins now found themselves in a pincer attack. This was the greatest emergency that had ever befallen the village. A desperate note could be clearly heard in the incessant ringing of the bell.

After a certain number of goblins had died, one with a significantly larger build appeared. Normal goblins were about a meter and a half tall, but this one was over two meters tall and was extremely jacked. It held a giant battle-ax in one hand.

Oh, there's the goblin king.

The monster pushed through its kin, approaching Allen.

"ROOOAAAR!"

However, a Sucker immediately attached itself to the goblin king and activated its Ability. A Beast D also turned around, launching ferocious

swipes with its vicious claws. Before long, the goblin king was on the ground.

As I'd thought. We're making short work of them.

The sight of the Beast Ds' furious assault assured Allen of his victory. The goblin king was only as strong as a Rank C monster, and Allen had already killed thousands of them by now, which meant it was no threat at all. The goblin king finally let go of its weapon and breathed its last.

<You have defeated 1 goblin king. You have earned 4,200 XP.>

After killing off the goblin king, Allen's forces proceeded to wipe out the remaining goblins, herding them into one area and gradually tightening the encirclement. Before long, a Beast D tore off the very last monster's head with its jaws.

Good, all done. Are there any left inside the buildings? You and you, come with me. Everyone else, gather all the corpses in the middle of the village.

Allen gave out orders, then walked into one of the goblin houses. He wrinkled his nose at the stench while rifling through the structure.

I'd half expected to find goblin children quivering in fear, but all of them seem to have already come charging out like rabid dogs just now.

Allen had been unsure what he would have done had he found frightened immature goblins in the houses. When the battle actually broke out, however, the young and elderly goblins had rushed out too, every bit as feral as the adults. Before he had time to think about it, his Summons had killed all of them in the same way. Apparently all goblins that laid eyes on a human would instinctively fly into a murderous rage.

When Allen walked into the next house, his thoughts were interrupted by a truly repulsive discovery: the bodies of several dead humans. He had no idea where they had been abducted from, but almost all of them had been reduced to bleached skeletons. Not a single survivor remained.

As I'd thought, I really must exterminate them.

Goblins were a precious source of XP. It would not have been strange at all for Allen's gamer self from his previous life to think it a waste to wipe them all out. However, if he acted on that thought and left these villages alone, the human casualties would only rise. Allen renewed his resolve to destroy every last village while instructing his Summons to gather the human remains in the center of the village too. Then he got to work harvesting the magic stones from all the goblins. The task took him almost two full hours. He needed the Rank D magic stones to create precious Crops of Magic. Naturally, he did not forget to extract the goblin king's Rank C magic stone as well.

Teddys, gather the materials from the houses.

Obediently, the Beast Ds shuffled over with heavy steps, dragging along wood, rags, and everything else. Allen instructed them to throw everything

on top of the pile of goblin carcasses. When they finished, he took out a lit torch from Storage—they remained lit even inside—and used it to set the construction materials on fire. After all, he did not want the knights who would be arriving later on to catch any infectious diseases from the corpses. Soon, the fire grew in size, turning the whole pile into a giant bonfire.

Now, what should I do with the human remains? I could cremate and bury them, but maybe the chivalric order has a different way of doing things. I guess I'll just line them up nicely for the knights to take care of.

Allen decided to let things be so as to not cause undue trouble.

Well, then. I now know that I can handle goblin villages just fine, so let's get serious about it. I still have orc villages to tackle afterward.

Thus began Allen's campaign to exterminate all the goblin villages at the foothills of the White Dragon Mountains.

□ □ □

The year turned, and it was now March. Allen checked his equipment one last time. In his hand was his beloved mithril sword, which had not suffered a single scratch ever since he bought it over a year ago following his encounter with a murdergalsh. Because it would get in the way, he was not wearing his mantle—his usual manservant uniform was the most appropriate outfit for his upcoming battle.

Allen looked into the eyes of his opponent, Mihai. For some reason, the atmosphere around the older boy seemed somewhat different from previous years.

After spending three full years at the Academy, Mihai had successfully graduated. Naturally, Cecil, who adored her eldest brother, was overjoyed to hear the news. However, as soon as he returned via magic ship, the first thing he did was summon Allen.

"I want you to fight me in earnest," he said, his usual smile absent from his face.

"Very well, milord. I shall fight you in earnest," Allen replied.

He had no idea what the reason for this fight was, but the two were currently facing each other in the garden of the Granvelle mansion. In a marked contrast from the matches of the previous two years, Mihai seemed to be emanating some incredible and great resolve.

Allen called out his grimoire to check his Status one last time. When he had turned ten the previous October, the modifier to his stats had disappeared completely, making the numbers much easier to read.

```
Name: Allen
Age: 10
Class: Summoner
Level: 34
HP: 865 + 400
```

MP: 1,340
Attack: 472 + 400
Endurance: 472 + 600
Agility: 883 + 600
Intelligence: 1,350
Luck: 883

Skills: Summoning {5}, Creation {5}, Synthesis {5}, Strengthening {5}, Expansion {4}, Storage, Sharing, Deletion, Sword Mastery {3}, Throwing {3}
XP: 1,490,410/7,000,000

Skill LevelsSummoning: 5
Creation: 5
Synthesis: 5
Strengthening: 5

Skill ExperienceCreation: 1,256/10,000,000
Synthesis: 1,820/10,000,000
Strengthening: 2,455,180/10,000,000

Creatable SummonsInsect: D, E, F, G, H
Beast: D, E, F, G, H
Bird: D, E, F, G
Grass: D, E, F
Stone: D, E
Fish: D

HolderInsect: D x 30
Beast: D x 20
Bird:
Grass:
Stone:
Fish:

Whereas Allen's aim the last two duels had been to gauge the growth of someone in Normal Mode, this time he was actually trying to win. As such, he had altered the distribution of his cards accordingly, getting rid of all the Grass cards and even disbanding the Summons Squad to dedicate every last stat point to this fight.

"Thank you, Allen."

"I'm sorry, milord?"

Allen was taken by surprise at Mihai's abrupt expression of gratitude, but at the same time, he also picked up on how serious his opponent was about this fight. He nodded in acknowledgment, prompting Mihai to draw his sword and assume a stance.

From his position between the two, Captain Zenof, who was serving as referee, asked, "Master Mihai, Allen. Are you both ready?"

Both nodded. As always, the baron's direct family was in full attendance. They held their breath, waiting for the start of the duel.

"Ready... FIGHT!"

That instant, Allen, whose Agility had finally surpassed 1,400, rushed forward, closing the distance in the blink of an eye. He intended on ending everything with this first blow. Surprise flitted across Mihai's face, but he still managed to react in time.

Gah, he parried it. No, I've still got this—judging from his movements, my Agility is higher!

However, although Allen was convinced that he was faster, he found Mihai calmly dealing with all his attacks, looking unperturbed as if he had already covered them in class. What was more, he soon realized that he was losing out to Mihai in strength. Every time the two swords clashed, it was Allen who was beaten back. Even so, Allen pressed on.

In sharp contrast to his family members' astonishment, the baron watched with a thoughtful expression.

He's...matching me somehow. Is he predicting my movements or something? Is my Sword Mastery skill too low?

Mihai was parrying all of Allen's attacks with what looked like textbook movements. Even though Allen was faster, he found himself slowly losing the initiative. He felt like he was being shown indirectly that all he had going for him was speed and that his maneuvers were far too simplistic. Perhaps it was because of a difference in Sword Mastery level; perhaps it was something else. In any case, it was not long before Allen once again found Mihai's sword at his throat. He stopped, breathing heavily.

"Match over!" Captain Zenof announced. It was Mihai's victory.

Ugh, I lost. I know I was faster, but I couldn't get past his guard. Does he have higher-leveled Sword Mastery boosting his accuracy? Should I have gone with more Agility? Hmm, but the difference between our Attack was way too large—he was pushing me back with pretty much every blow.

"You really are incredible, Allen," Mihai said, interrupting Allen's thoughts. He was quite out of breath too. "I'm glad you are Cecil's personal manservant."

"Thank you, milord." Huh? No handshake this time?

At the end of the previous two fights, Mihai had approached Allen to ask for a handshake. This time, however, he was apparently forgoing the gesture.

Everyone then headed back inside. Soon, it was dinnertime. Allen was on serving duty today.

Suddenly, the baroness, who had been left dumbstruck after the match earlier in the day, said appreciatively, “I had no idea you could fight that well, Allen.”

“Thank you, my lady,” Allen replied. “However, I am still greatly lacking in comparison to Master Mihai.”

“Oh, I know!” Cecil clapped her hands, a barely suppressed grin on her face that looked like a combination of both delight at her beloved brother’s return and pride at the fighting prowess displayed by her personal attendant. “How about asking Mihai to give you sword lessons tomorrow?”

“If Master Mihai has the time and so wishes, it would be my honor to receive his instruction,” Allen responded, bowing in Mihai’s direction.

However, Mihai, who had lowered his gaze at the word “tomorrow” from Cecil, looked up and said, “I haven’t told you yet, Cecil, but…”

“What is it, Mihai?”

“I have royal service for the next three years.”

“What?” Cecil froze in shock. She had been under the impression that Mihai was back for good.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you earlier.”

“But…! When will you be leaving?”

“Tomorrow.”

Cecil was so shocked now that even words failed her.

“Don’t worry, I’ll write you letters.”

Nothing Mihai said was registering in Cecil’s head anymore.

Royal service? This somehow reminds me of what Viscount Carnel said that time.

The lord of the neighboring fiefdom had dropped by before, seemingly to rub in Baron Granvelle’s face the fact that *his* daughter had been pronounced Talentless. Allen had deduced from this that there was likely a troublesome form of mandated service tied to graduating from the Academy. And sure enough, after working so hard to graduate, Mihai now had to leave home for three years to fulfill this so-called royal service.

While Allen was eating breakfast the next morning, Sebas came into the servants’ dining hall and informed everyone that Mihai would be leaving at 9 a.m. and that they were to see him off. Allen normally headed upstairs at 8 a.m. to get Cecil’s things in order, so he had to hurry to finish everything in time.

While cleaning her room, Allen shot a look at Cecil, who had already finished getting changed. She was clearly still feeling depressed. Three years was quite a long time. What was more, as Mihai had explained last night, royal service did not come with long breaks like the Academy’s spring break, so Cecil’s contact with him would truly be reduced to mere letters.

In the blink of an eye, 9 a.m. arrived. There was a carriage already parked in front of the mansion’s entrance, and the front gate was thrown wide open. All the servants had gathered at the entrance hall a bit earlier and were now standing in two rows on either side of the carpet that

stretched from the main staircase to the door. As the newest member of the manservants, and therefore the one at the bottom of the hierarchy, Allen's position was at the very end, right next to the door.

Heavy clanking sounded as Mihai emerged at the top of the staircase and began his descent. He was wearing a full suit of armor and had a sword at his waist. The other members of the baron's family followed behind him.

Is he going to show up to the royal family's service in that armor?

When the family reached ground level, Mihai reached over to Cecil, who had been looking down the entire time, and gave her head a few gentle pats.

"I'll be waiting for you to come home, Mihai."

"Mm. I'll see you again, Cecil."

After exchanging his final goodbyes, Mihai started walking toward the door.

Farew— Huh?

Instead of making for the carriage outside, to Allen's surprise, Mihai headed straight for him. Allen watched his approach in bewilderment. Then, without any prior warning, the older boy who was a head taller enveloped him in a hug.

What is this…?

"Allen, I leave Cecil in your hands. Protect her," said Mihai.

Despite being completely mystified, Allen managed to reply with, "Y-Yes, milord."

Mihai let go and walked several steps away to stand in the doorway before he turned around. With the carriage at his back, he declared, “I shall now go and fulfill my duty on behalf of House Granvelle.”

After leaving behind those words, he boarded the carriage as everyone saw him off.

Huh? Was he shaking?

Allen could not tell for sure through the armor, but he thought he sensed the other boy quivering during the hug.

In this way, Mihai once again left the mansion, setting off to fulfill his royal service.

□□□

Two months had passed since Mihai’s departure and it was now May. Allen was currently at the foothills of the White Dragon Mountains.

In the seven months that had passed since he had first attacked one last October, he had managed to completely eradicate all goblin villages along the length of the mountain chain in the area within the Granvelle fiefdom. That had come to a count of fifty-two villages—with there being around two hundred goblins at each, that was a sum of roughly ten thousand goblins. The chivalric order had assaulted a few settlements, but the ones that Allen had taken down made up more than eighty percent of the overall total.

As there were no more goblin villages, Allen was going to attack his very first orc village today. The goblin kings that had led the villages were only Rank C, so he had been able to kill them quite handily. The orc kings that led their villages, however, were Rank B. Today was also going to be Allen’s very first attempt at killing a Rank B monster.

According to the feed from a Bird E using Hawk Eye, the chivalric order was still quite far behind. Their great numbers made it hard for them to move swiftly. They would likely arrive at this village tomorrow, so Allen wanted to finish everything within the day.

His plan was to go with a pincer attack, the same strategy that he had used against the goblin villages. That meant placing five Beast Ds and one Insect D on standby at the back of the village. Allen would attack from the front gate, and then have those on standby charge in ten minutes later.

All right, let’s begin. Come out, Teddys, Spidey, Belly, and Brons.

Six Beast Ds, one Insect D, one Fish D, and two Stone Ds appeared. One thing that Allen was doing differently today was introducing the Stone Summons. Just as the goblins did, he expected the orcs to throw spears and shoot arrows. However, the same tactic being used by orcs was much more of a threat than when used by goblins. The longer the battle went, the more chances there were for a projectile attack to reach Allen.

This was why he now had two Stone D Summons taking up defensive positions in front of himself. Just how useful would these bronze statues carrying two-meter-tall shields be? Today was, among everything else, also

a test drive for them. Allen was never one to let an opportunity for analyzing his Summons go to waste.

Without ado, Fish D used its Ability, Splash, on the entire group. Although Allen had called out all his Summons in an area that was a blind spot from the village's gate, there were so many of them that the sentries on the walls might spot them regardless. Allen decided to launch his attack before he lost the element of surprise.

Here goes—the first orc village assault!

The plan leaped into motion. Just like in the goblin villages, there were two orcs standing guard at the gate. When the Summons all burst from cover, roaring fiercely and shaking the ground with their pounding, shock ran through the orcs on the walls and in the watchtowers. The village bell started ringing cacophonously, signaling an emergency.

The Beast Ds at the very front Crushed the two gate guards to death. These giant bears, after being Strengthened, could more than hold their own against orcs one-on-one.

As I expected, the orcs're shooting a lot of arrows at me.

The two Stone Ds held their shields high up, protecting Allen from the projectiles. However, there was no such cover for the Beast Ds, which were gradually being turned into pincushions. Currently, Allen had no way of checking the Summons' HP. If he did not pay careful enough attention, his Summons would suddenly disappear on him, dissipating into bubbles of light.

Not being able to see how much HP my Summons have left really is inconvenient, since it's pretty sudden when they die on me in the middle of hunts. Hmm, maybe I should add more Spideys. Come on out.

In order to lessen the amount of damage the Beast Ds were taking, Allen Summoned two more Insect Ds. Naturally, he was keeping a record in his grimoire of the adjustments he was making to serve as reference for future attacks.

Three giant spiders clambered over the watchtowers and walls, spitting Spider Silk everywhere. When the Teddys finally burst through the gate, a crowd of roughly two hundred orcs came into sight.

Nice, nice, all the XP's been gathered. I'll be helping myself, then!

Allen pressed forward in high spirits—but soon realized that the sheer number of orcs was making it hard to make as much headway as he wanted. So, as the Beast Ds continued wading through by spamming Crush, the Summons that had been positioned at the far side of the village as reinforcements charged in. The new force of Beast Ds and Insect D caught the orcs in the back by surprise.

Around thirty minutes later, just as the number of remaining orcs had dwindled to around half, Allen—who had his eye on the battle line—noticed a burst of light several ranks behind.

Hm? That's... It's fire! Brons, use Defend!

The next instant, several red flames appeared high above, then quickly turned into fireballs and flew directly at Allen. He promptly ducked behind the two Stone Ds' shields and ordered them to activate their Ability.

BOOOOOOMM!

That was magic! Are my Summons...okay, they're still fine. Wait, there are more incoming!

There were several orcs wearing fluttering clothes and holding staves standing deep within the group. More fireballs appeared in midair, mercilessly raining down on Allen's forces.

Damn, there are ones that can use magic too? This is my first time encountering monsters that can use magic. Ah, the Summons on the other side have all been wiped out. Gotta keep sending out more.

As the precise number of Summons out in the field was the key to Allen's way of fighting, he was keeping a constant eye on his Status to monitor the quantity of each card he had. Whenever a number went down, he immediately Created a replacement, Strengthened it, then Summoned it out. The pages of the floating grimoire flipped at a dizzying speed.

In this case, I should probably get more Brons out. But first of all, you! Die!

In the midst of everything else he was doing, Allen took out an iron ball from Storage and threw it at one of the magic-using orcs with all his strength. It pulverized the monster's face.

Awesome, that's one down. I'll increase my own defense while making it a priority to kill the ones that can use magic. Huh, where'd they go?

The moment they saw their fellow get killed, the other magic-using orcs had shifted position so that Allen could no longer see them from behind Stone D.

Shit, they hid. They're smart enough to hide! Hawkins, show me where they are!

This whole time, Allen had been Sharing the vision of several Hawkins that were circling the village from up in the sky. Thanks to them, he knew exactly where the magic-using orcs were. However, the Stone Ds blocking his line of sight to them meant that he could not throw iron balls at them, and they were standing too deep within the orc forces for Beast Ds to get at them easily.

As the fireballs aimed at Allen had been deflected by the Stone Ds' shields, everything in his vicinity was now on fire. Both the village's walls and towers were eventually engulfed by flames, turning the scene into one of hellish pandemonium.

Okay, my strategy's completely fallen apart. So now I can only brute force this using sheer numbers. I know I can't lose, but still...just you all wait and see!

The surprise appearance of the magic-using orcs had made Allen lose his initiative. The cleverness of the orcs that could use spells had also been something he did not see coming. However, after two and a half years of

hunting, he now had over twenty thousand Rank D magic stones in Storage. In other words, he could actually Create twenty thousand Summons. Although it would drag on for a while, his victory was only a matter of time. He decided to focus on killing the orcs in front of him one at a time, ensuring that he himself remained protected from the magic attacks in the meanwhile.

The dogged fighting continued. After the death of a few dozen more orcs, one that looked markedly different from the others burst out from even further back than the magic-using orcs. It quickly made its way toward Allen, unceremoniously shoving aside all the orcs in its way.

Aaand there's the orc king.

This monster was clearly on a whole other dimension than the others. Not only was it twice as large, it was also wearing armor and holding a gigantic halberd. It gradually picked up momentum as it charged forward.

"GUMOOOOOHHHHH!"

With a deafening cry, it swung its weapon and instantly reduced two Beast Ds to bubbles of light. Allen hurried to Summon more, but he was having trouble matching the orc king's speed. The thirty Teddys that he had called out in expectation of a protracted fight started going down one by one.

Should I retreat?

Just as Allen was about to give the command to pull back, more fireballs came hailing down. The Stone Ds blocked them with their shields, only to also disappear into bubbles of light.

Shit, the Brons are gone too!

The barrage of fireballs continued. Nearby Beast Ds threw themselves in front of Allen to shield him with their bodies, but the shockwaves from the explosions still managed to blow Allen off his feet.

Owww! Okay, yeah, I really do need to retreat. Before the situation gets any worse.

However, the moment Allen picked himself back up, bruised all over, a familiar voice spoke behind him.

"Hm, looks like you need a hand."

"Huh?"

Allen whirled around and found Captain Zenof standing there, distinctive beard and all.

"A scout reported seeing fire going up, so I came to investigate. What's going on here?"

The countless scars on the man's arms and face seemed all the more eye-catching as he drew the sword on his waist and slowly walked past Allen.

It's Zenof. I thought he'd come here tomorrow. Did he run over?

"I…thought I would try cleaning up an orc village."

Allen chose to be honest. More than a hundred orc corpses lay on the ground, leaving little doubt as to what he was doing. He reverted all his

Summons so the knight captain would not mistake them for monsters. For a split second, he considered leaving a Stone D just in case, but the sight of the man approaching the orcs as if he was on a stroll assured him that even such measures were now superfluous.

He totally got an eyeful of my Summons.

There was no doubt in Allen's mind that the knight captain had gotten a clear look at his Summons fighting. He wondered if he was going to be interrogated about them later.

"Gumoh?" The orc king sized up its new opponent warily.

"I see, an orc king. I'll take care of it. In the meantime, you take care of the chaff, Vice-Captain Leibrand."

"Sir, yes, sir!"

Huh?! Vice-Captain Leibrand is here too?!

Just as Zenof did, Leibrand also walked past Allen, weapon—in his case, a spear—in hand.

Seemingly infuriated by Zenof's undaunted attitude, the orc king swung its halberd with all its strength, roaring, "GUMOOOOHHHHHH!"

This was a four-meter-tall monster brandishing a five-meter-long weapon in its rage. Even so, the knight captain managed to beat it back with his sword, even making it look easy. The impact from the blow was so great it blasted the giant monster off its feet for a brief moment. The orc king returned an attack so fierce Allen flinched instinctively, kicking off the start of a furious exchange between the knight captain and the monster.

At the same time, the vice-captain advanced on the normal orcs with his spear over his shoulder, not a hint of trepidation on his face. The magic-using orcs reacted first, shooting three fireballs into the air.

"I see, magic," Leibrand murmured before his figure suddenly turned blurry and became enveloped in a shimmering haze. The next instant, he thrust his spear at the monsters faster than the eye could see. The shockwave generated from the point bored a huge hole in the abdomen of five or six orcs in a row. Blood exploded after a beat and the victims crumpled to the ground, dead. One of them was a magic-user. Apparently Leibrand was prioritizing them.

One of the fireballs lost momentum and dissipated, but the other two continued flying toward the vice-captain from different directions.

"Hmph!"

Leibrand sliced the two fireballs apart with a single swing, causing them to break apart and similarly dissolve harmlessly. During this whole exchange, he was still walking toward the orcs, his face as cool as a cucumber.

The orcs drew back in fear for a brief moment at the sight of the vice-captain dealing with the magic attacks so easily, but the next instant, they all surged forward. In response, the knight also picked up his pace, quickly shifting into a full-speed charge himself. When the two sides clashed, he sliced and diced the monsters every which way, making short work of them.

At the same time, the fight between the captain and orc king was also coming to an end. The former slashed down with his sword, bisecting both the halberd held up in defense and his opponent, armor and all. The orc king was clearly no match for the captain. After mere minutes, the two knights had finished off every last orc within the village walls.

They're freaking strong! I guess that's the "fiefdom's most powerful man" for you. And turns out the vice-captain can really hold his own too.

Allen recalled hearing from Raven about how everyone familiar with the knight captain's fighting style called him "War Demon Zenof." Similarly, it was hard to imagine the vice-captain being the same man who had been thoroughly beaten up by Krena in her youth. Mihai had previously told Allen that Leibrand was strong, and now he saw the truth in that statement for himself.

The haze thing that Leibrand used, was it an Extra Skill? So other classes have Extra Skills too, not just Sword Lord. Speaking of which, Zenof didn't use his at all.

As Allen started analyzing what he had seen, Zenof approached. "My men will arrive slightly after sunset today. Let's finish taking care of all of this then."

Surprisingly, he was not questioning why Allen was here. Zenof, Leibrand, and Allen worked together to gather all the orc corpses into the middle of the village. There was no need to purposely show off his Summons, so Allen pulled his weight using only his own strength. Just as he had done for the goblin villages, they were going to cremate the remains.

"Captain, I want half the magic stones," Allen said.

"Hm? Well, that's fair. Very well."

Allen had already killed around half of the orcs by the time Zenof and Leibrand arrived, so he made sure to properly request what he deserved. The truth was that he wanted the Rank B magic stone too, but he let it go, as it was the captain who had killed it. The three quickly dug out the magic stones from the mountain of corpses. During the process, Allen caught Zenof looking over as if he wanted to ask about the Summons, but he never did.

According to Zenof, they would have to fully burn this place to the ground afterward to prevent other orcs from moving in and using it as a settlement again. The human remains were fine being gathered in one place; the chivalric order would bring them back in case any surviving kin wanted them.

While the three of them were in the middle of moving the human remains, the rest of the knights arrived on the scene. They had pushed their schedule forward in order to catch up with their captain.

It's about time for me to head back, or I won't make curfew.

Allen looked up to confirm the position of the sun. Considering the distance between this location and Granvelle City, he would not be able to arrive back at the mansion within the day if he did not head off soon. When

he announced that he would be returning, however, Zenof said, “Camp out with us tonight. I’ll explain things to His Lordship afterward.” Naturally, Allen had no choice in the matter.

Because the orc village stank terribly, the knights moved off a certain distance away to make camp. From what Allen could see with a Bird E, there were about a hundred knights on this expedition. This was probably a reasonable number for taking on orc villages. Honestly speaking, he thought the knight captain could probably take on an entire village all by himself, but the others probably all had their own roles to play. There were some things that required numbers rather than individual strength.

With practiced movements, the knights soon had the camp all set up.

“Allen. Come eat over here.” Zenof called out to Allen, who had been watching from a corner so as to not get in anyone’s way.

“Yes, Sir,” Allen replied, obediently approaching the fire. He was handed the drumstick of a wild bird and urged to dig in.

“So, all the destroyed goblin villages that we found were your doing.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“You understand my need for up-to-date intel as the knight captain, yes? So I have to ask: how many goblin villages are left up ahead?”

“None, I believe. I destroyed fifty-two of them in total.”

There may be ones that’ve just sprung up, but I can at least say for certain that there aren’t any left in the foothills of the White Dragon Mountains.

Allen had scoured the area meticulously for goblin villages using Bird E and thoroughly razed every last one to the ground.

Zenof’s brows drew together in a thoughtful frown. “You’re just as—no, *beyond* what I’d heard.”

“I’m sorry, Sir? What did you hear?”

The knight captain began recounting all of Allen’s feats to date, prompting the boy to set his drumstick down and listen closely. At six years of age, he had brought down his first albaheron, then went on to hunt more than fifty of them over the next two years; this matched perfectly with the years Krena Village had exported a large number of albaheron feathers to Granvelle City. Then, at age seven, he had started advising the village’s hunting party. As a result, the number of great boars they were able to take down per year doubled from ten to twenty.

How does he know all that? I mean, he probably asked around in Krena Village. But still, that’s a lot of detail.

As figurative question marks appeared over Allen’s head, Zenof continued.

Right after Allen started working at the Granvelle mansion, strange occurrences began cropping up in the area between Granvelle City and the White Dragon Mountains. Goblin corpses bearing slashes like claw marks turned up in large numbers, every last one with its magic stone carved out. The numbers kept climbing and climbing, with the final total, according to reports, exceeding even one thousand.

One year later, reports came in of the same thing happening, this time to orcs. Starting last year, armored ants were added to the list of monsters suffering the same fate. Crucially, the days such discoveries were reported overlapped perfectly with Allen’s days off and the days he went out as a huntsman. Most recently, almost every goblin village that the chivalric order had advanced on had already been wiped out and burned to the ground.

Damn, he’s basically got a perfect account of everything I’ve been up to. It makes sense when I think about it, though. I did leave all those monsters’ corpses just lying around after I took their magic stones. It’s not like I went to the trouble of burying them either. Of course Zenof would hear of this, being the knight captain and all.

In light of everything that he had learned, the knight captain had come to doubt the reading from Allen's Appraisal Ceremony. There was no way he had low stats and no Talent. His three matches with Mihai—which Zenof had witnessed in person—had been more than enough to indicate that something was amiss.

So Zenof summoned the clergymen who had handled Allen's Appraisal Ceremony to gain a more detailed account of what had happened at the time. All of them firmly insisted that Allen had no Talent. But this raised another question.

This group of clergymen traveled throughout the kingdom every year, starting from the royal capital and stopping at various fiefdoms and villages on a specific route. The number of children that they had Appraised throughout the years was beyond counting, and yet, they somehow still remembered this one boy from so many years ago.

When the knight captain had queried the clergymen, they thought it strange as well and started to reexamine their memories more thoroughly. This process ended up helping them recall the occasion in greater detail. The crystal used in the ceremony was supposed to glow in different ways depending on the child's Talent, but it had glowed so brightly for Allen that everyone present had to shut their eyes. Add in Allen's rare black hair and eyes, and little wonder the incident had remained vivid in their minds. The clergymen had nodded at each other's contributions to the conversation as if comparing answers while reconstructing the situation piece by piece.

Thanks to this, the memory of the head clergyman who had headed the ceremony was jogged and he was able to recall the reading on the pitch-black metallic plate. He retracted what he had said earlier about Allen not having a Talent, explaining that there had indeed been characters on the display, but that they had been illegible. This, combined with the low stat values, was what had led him to conclude it must have been some sort of error and to declare the boy Talentless.

"And it is thanks to that Talent that you've been able to kill so many monsters, yes?"

"Uh…yes, Sir."

"Mm."

The knight captain was now sure that Allen knew that he had a Talent despite having been declared Talentless and had kept quiet about it all this time.

He's caught on. Is he going to ask me about my class? Not that I intend on telling him anything.

Allen had every intention of glossing things over if pressed for details, but the knight captain never did ask him in the end. The two continued eating their meal while staring into the fire.

After a long silence, just as Allen looked up to peer at Zenof's face, the man said abruptly, "His Lordship already knows everything."

It was nearing the three-year mark of Allen's time at the Granvelle mansion, but as it turned out, the baron had already known about him for quite a long time. In other words, he had allowed Allen free rein with full awareness of the boy's doings. Making him a huntsman so soon after he entered service had, aside from the demands from other servants and whatnot, been a conscious decision to go along with what Allen wanted.

"Why...would he go so far for me?" Allen asked, taken aback.

"Well...I'm sure you're curious, but it's not my place to say. His Lordship might share his thoughts with you directly one day. Lend him an ear then."

"Lend him an ear"? That's a weird way of putting it. It almost sounds like he might ask me, a mere manservant, for something.

Zenof requested that Allen report to him on matters like his next targets and current progress whenever the captain visited the mansion in the future, then fell silent again. This, of course, made sense from his position. He and his men had gone to the trouble of making thorough preparations to fight a whole village of goblins only to arrive on-site and find it already razed to the ground and all the goblins dead. Understandably, finding all their effort wasted would negatively affect the troop's morale, especially when it happened so many times. After having been allowed to do as he pleased for so long, there was no way for Allen to refuse this request. So he agreed, after which Zenof nodded and grew silent once more. In the very end, he never did ask for details about the Summons or the way Allen usually spent his days.

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After dinner was over, a knight came over to the fire where Zenof and Allen were warming themselves to report that preparations for the bath were complete. By bath, he was referring to a simple process of using a bucket of hot water for wiping off sweat and grime. The knight captain immediately stood up and took off his armor right there.

Remembering that he had yet to thank the man for saving his life, Allen offered to wipe his back. He gasped when he saw the fifty-some-year-old's bare back—it was marred with countless scars, as befitted a veteran soldier of decades. Although the captain had plenty of scars on his arms and face, Allen had not imagined that it would be the same under his armor as well.

Allen then knelt down to wipe Zenof's back, wondering just how many life-and-death battles he had lived through. But when he got close enough to take a better look, he gasped once more. Many of the scars had been wounds so deep that large swathes of skin had been removed, revealing the muscle below. From the looks of things, all of them had likely been near-fatal.

"Mm? What's the matter?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Sir. I will begin wiping now. Um, by the way..." *These old wounds...are painful even to look at.*

"Yes?"

“I have recovery items that can probably heal you. Would you like me to use them?”

“I’m good.”

“I have plenty of them, though.”

“No, there’s no need. Leave it.”

“Y-Yes, Sir.”

Allen had been thinking of using a Leaf of Life, but to his surprise, Zenof turned his offer down. The man apparently wanted to keep his scars. Allen fell silent and resumed wiping.

Still, today’s hunt was an utter failure. There’s not much I can do when the orcs group up like they did today. Slowly pushing in is just a war of attrition, the worst strategy possible. And me entering the gate was a huge mistake too.

While diligently wiping the back before his eyes, Allen reflected on how today went.

Suddenly, the knight captain asked, “Do you find hunting fun?” almost as if he had read Allen’s mind.

“Yes, Sir. It’s incredibly fun.”

“I see.”

Silence returned between the two. There was a hint of sadness in Zenof’s face, but Allen could not see it from his angle.

The next day, Allen finally returned to the mansion. After explaining what had happened to Sebas, he was let off without a reprimand. All Sebas said was, “I’m glad you’re back home safe.” This reaction was all that Allen needed to realize he really had been *allowed* to hunt as much as he wanted. The reason still remained a mystery, though.

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Two weeks passed, and it was now the end of May.

“GUUMOOOHHHHHHH!!!”

The orc king roared at the top of its lungs, then fell to the ground, bleeding profusely.

<You have defeated 1 orc king. You have earned 25,000 XP.>

Hmm, is this really the best way of doing this? I ended up using 120 Rank D magic stones. But before anything else, hooray for getting my first Rank B magic stone!

After much trial and error, Allen had finally succeeded in clearing an orc village all by himself.

The first attempt had taught him that slowly pushing in from the front gate was a bad idea, as it gave the orcs time to set up formations and drag things into a war of attrition, gradually wearing each side out. Based on this lesson, he had changed up his tactics.

First, he arranged forty Beast Ds into four groups of ten each and made them attack the orc village from all four directions at the same time. If each

Beast D could kill two orcs using the element of surprise, that was eighty orcs down before they could even react. Suddenly lowering their numbers so drastically proved an effective way to prevent them from forming up.

Then he used Sharing to remotely control four Beast Ds to target the magic-using orcs. Just in case, he had also instructed the other Summons to prioritize killing the magic-users should the opportunity present itself.

The rest was simple, no matter how many Summons went down and no matter if an orc king came out or not. In short, he just continued calling out as many Summons as needed to overwhelm the enemy through sheer numbers. With Allen himself taking up position somewhere out of harm's way, victory was simply a matter of time.

Just now, Allen had just proved the efficacy of this new strategy.

I did end up using quite a few magic stones, but now I know I do have the ability and resources to win. I may have failed in my blind playthrough, but now I got this.

In Allen's previous life, playing a game without any prior knowledge was called "doing a blind playthrough." Failure was a very common element in these playthroughs. What was most important as a gamer was the ability to learn from past mistakes to pull off a better run next time.

All right, now that I'm able to clear an orc village alone, it's time to shift focus to improving efficiency.

Thus began Allen's campaign to exterminate all the orc villages at the foothills of the White Dragon Mountains.

Chapter 10: Cecil Leaves Home

October rolled around, and Allen turned eleven. After his first success clearing an orc village at the end of May, he had gone on to wipe out twenty more since. There were still plenty left, but he planned on getting to every last one of them eventually. Naturally, he was starting in the north and making his way south in line with the baron's desire to resume mithril mining operations.

Thanks to his work, preparations for opening the northernmost mine had sped up significantly—the process that had been expected to take three years at least had now been shortened to two. Hiring laborers for the mine and its associated facilities was also going so smoothly that preparations for the village where the laborers would be living could begin as soon as the snow melted away in the coming spring.

Everything's going great. I'll keep wiping out the orc villages at this pace, then hopefully clear out the armored ant nests too before becoming an adventurer next year.

Back when he was eight, Allen had made up his mind that he would resign from service to House Granvelle once he turned twelve. Three very eventful years had passed since then.

"Allen, I leave Cecil in your hands. Protect her."

As the days counted down to the day of Allen's resignation, Mihai's words began surfacing more and more often in his mind. Just what on earth did Mihai want Allen to protect Cecil from? If the intention behind those words had been for Allen to continue serving Cecil for the rest of his life, then he would have to refuse. He had mulled over the line many times, trying to figure out what else it could mean. Sadly, no answer came to mind.

"So! Royal envoy today!" Rickel commented, sliding into the seat across from Allen's as the boy was eating breakfast.

"That's what they said," Allen replied, thinking about how these breakfast chats had gone on for more than three years now.

Just as Rickel had mentioned, a royal envoy was scheduled to arrive that day. All the servants had been informed the day before that he was to be expected slightly after noon. All personal attendants had been ordered to gather in the dining room on the second floor at the time.

Is it going to be talk about raising the head tax again?

No one had heard what the purpose of the visit was. The large majority of royal envoys were quite haughty, so nobody really looked forward to their visits.

Noon arrived, bringing with it the royal envoy. Sebas guided him from the entrance hall to the second floor dining room. Allen stood at attention right behind Cecil, who sat at the lowest seat among the members of the baron's immediate family. The other personal servants had also taken up

positions right behind the respective family member they served. There were no arrangements for food to be served—this would not be a lunch.

Soon, three people walked into the dining hall. The one at the head was noticeably better dressed, making it clear he was the envoy and the other two his aides. He took the distinguished seat at the head of the table as his aides stood at his sides. One of them was holding something.

After Sebas walked over to stand behind his master's seat directly across from the envoy, the baron said, "Thank you for coming all this way. May I ask what the nature of your visit is today?"

"Mm, House Granvelle has always served the royal family well. His Majesty has called Baron Granvelle's dedication an exemplar for the other nobles."

"I-It is an incredible honor to receive such praise. As the servant entrusted with the management of the realm of Granvelle, I express my heartfelt thanks to His Royal Majesty."

As someone invested with the exclusive authority to speak on behalf of the king, the royal envoy's status was above that of the baron's. The baron was quite shaken, as this was the first time a royal envoy had ever started a visit with such praise.

The room then fell silent for a while as the baron waited patiently for the envoy to continue speaking. Thomas squinted at the man as if asking, "What's with him?"

Eventually, the envoy said, "It truly pains me to deliver this, but..."

Those words seemed to be a signal, as the aide holding something made his way to the middle of the long table. Sebas walked forward to meet him and accepted the proffered envelope before turning back and reverently laying it in front of the baron.

"A letter?"

"Indeed. From your son."

This exchange between the envoy and her father prompted Cecil to turn and stare at the letter on the table.

The baron's eyes widened. "F-From Mihai?"

This time, no reply came.

Seeing that the envoy had no intention of saying anything further, Baron Granvelle opened the unsealed envelope and took out a single piece of parchment. When he did so, however, several strands of what looked like lavender-colored thread also fell out. The blood drained from the baron's face at the sight.

He immediately began reading the letter, but soon blurted out in distress, "What?! But! How can...?!"

"F-Father, what did Mihai write?!"

Normally whenever a guest visited, only the baron was supposed to speak. The others could only reply when addressed directly by the guest. Cecil had been so unsettled that she forgot this rule and called out to her

father, but the man did not respond, his attention focused solely on the letter in his hand, his shoulders quaking.

“Wh-When was this written?”

“They are asked to write these regularly and this is the most recent one, which means it’s from around three months ago.”

“What?! But that’s… This is different from what I was promised! H-How could this happen in only six months?!”

The envoy’s unconcerned attitude seemed to have rubbed the baron the wrong way as he railed at the man, his emotions on full display in sharp contrast from his usual self.

“Your son fulfilled his duty, that is all.”

The baron leaped to his feet, glaring daggers. “I-I bet you purposely stationed him in a dangerous place j-just because I’m a lower noble! Mihai had only just graduated from the Academy!”

“Am I to take those as words directed toward the royal family?”

“Wha—?!”

The royal envoy’s haughty attitude had remained the same ever since he walked into the dining hall. He used the same stiff and impassive tone as before to give a response that bordered on a warning. The baron started and swallowed his words back down.

“What is… Let me read it!”

Unable to sit still any longer, the baroness got up and snatched the letter from the baron’s hands. Halfway through scanning the page, she muttered, “This can’t be… M-Mihai…” and fainted from shock. Her personal attendant caught her in the nick of time and carried her off to her room.

“The gratuity payment will be delivered at a later date after your son’s register has been properly reviewed and recorded.”

The baron’s head had gone entirely blank. None of the envoy’s businesslike declarations were reaching his ears.

“Well then, the letter has been delivered, and so my business here is done. I have to head for the next fiefdom now, so I shall take my leave. Baron Granvelle?”

“Y-Yes, my lord?”

The envoy stood up and said, “Remember to continue fulfilling your duty to the royal family as baron of the realm of Granvelle.”

The three visitors exited the dining room, leaving the baron in a total daze. When Sebas made to follow along to escort them out, the envoy said curtly, “No need.”

Silence filled the dining hall until Cecil spoke up in a quivering voice, “Father, wh-what happened?”

Anyone could tell from the way the conversation went just now that Mihai had passed away, and Cecil was not stupid. What she was asking was why he had died and how things had ended up this way.

“That’s… Everyone, leave us. You too, Thomas.”

Apparently even Thomas, a member of the baron's direct family, was not allowed to hear what he was going to say. Everyone obediently exited the dining hall, leaving only the baron, Sebas, and Cecil inside.

That afternoon, Allen was to clean the mansion together with the maidservants. While his hands moved, his mind mulled over Mihai's parting words.

"Allen, I leave Cecil in your hands. Protect her."

Just like the others, Allen had picked up on the fact that Mihai had passed away from the conversation between the baron and the envoy. That meant the letter was likely his last will. He had expected his own death.

Abruptly, a shrill scream filled with rage exploded from the second floor, filling the entire mansion. "THAT MEANS YOU LEFT HIM TO DIE! YOU SENT HIM OFF KNOWING HE WOULD DIE!"

"Wha—?! That's not what I said! W-We nobles have a duty—"

"AND YOU'RE SAYING NOW I HAVE TO DIE FOR THIS STUPID DUTY TOO?! WAS I BORN JUST TO DIE AS WELL?!"

"No! That's not— Cecil! Stop right there. *Cecil*!"

The dining hall door banged open so loudly that the sound reverberated throughout the mansion. Cecil had apparently rushed out in a rage. The nearby servants all exchanged looks, wondering what had happened.

That night, Cecil did not show up for dinner.

The next morning, Rickel once again slipped into the seat across from Allen's during breakfast. "Hey, did you hear the shouting yesterday?"

"Well, it was pretty loud." I think everyone in the mansion heard, to be honest.

"Looks like it's true."

"What is?"

Rickel leaned over, gesturing for Allen to bring his head near. Then, in a low tone, he said, "I heard a rumor long ago, back when I was still a houseboy, that the members of the Granvelle family all die early. Apparently it had happened to the baron's parents and older brother."

It was clear from Rickel's attitude that this was not something meant to be spread around loudly. Allen continued chatting with him until it was time to head up and tend to Cecil. He joined up with a maidservant, and together they went up to the room of the young lady of the house, who had skipped dinner the night before.

As usual, the maidservant knocked on the door and entered first to help Cecil change. The moment she stepped in, however, her scream rang out, "LADY CECIIIIIL!"

Allen, who had been standing by right outside the door like normal, immediately rushed in. The first thing he saw was the maidservant, who had fallen on her behind and had both hands clapped over her mouth. The second thing he noticed was that Cecil was nowhere to be seen. The third thing…was that the window was open.

He rushed over to the window and peered outside. Did she escape from this window?! But this is the third floor! Shit, she's nowhere in sight.

"What is all the commotion?!" Sebas roared, having rushed over in response to the maidservant's scream.

After hearing her explanation, Sebas then promptly ordered all the staff to go and search for Cecil. Even the baron and baroness joined in, but no one found the slightest trace of her. Allen combed through every inch of the mansion, going even so far as the stables, but to no avail. He decided to return to her room to speak with Sebas, who was still at a complete loss.

"Sir, if milady is nowhere on the grounds, she just might have gone out into the city. May I have permission to go search outside?"

"Good idea. I'm counting on you!"

After having received his permission, Allen rushed out of the mansion.

Where is she?!

When Allen had looked out of the window earlier, he had already sent out eight Bird Es into the sky, making sure to do it in a surreptitious way, of course. Now, he was Sharing with all of them, Hawk Eye activated, and had them scouring the city.

Why does this city have to be so huge? Please don't be inside a building.

Perhaps due to its previous status as a hub for mithril mining, Granvelle City was quite sizable. What's more, since Hawk Eye could not see inside buildings, Allen could only hope that Cecil was somewhere outside where he could see her.

Found her!

There was a young girl with lavender-colored hair crouched on the ground, hugging her knees in an alleyway several turns off of the main avenue in the business district. One look and it was clear that this area did not have good public order. As Allen hurriedly made his way over to her, he realized that the vicinity appeared to be a slum area. The air was damp and foul.

When Allen approached, Cecil's shoulders jolted. She slowly lifted her head. "Allen…?"

"Yes, milady."

After excusing himself, Allen sat on the ground next to Cecil. The two of them sat in silence for a while.

"Didn't you come to bring me back?"

"No, I did not."

"What? Then why…?"

"I am your personal manservant, Lady Cecil. When you go on an outing, it is my duty to accompany you."

Over the past few years, Allen had visited a lot of different places throughout Granvelle City in his capacity as Cecil's personal manservant. That included shopping trips, events that Cecil had to attend as the daughter of the feudal lord, and at times, simple walks that had no

particular purpose. According to Allen, this situation was no different from all the other times before.

The answer was so unexpected that Cecil found herself at a loss for words.

“Lady Cecil, I see you have a wound on your leg. I have some herbs with me. Please excuse me as I apply it.”

Allen reached over with a Leaf of Life to heal the gash that Cecil had likely gotten while escaping from the mansion.

“Huh?”

Cecil exclaimed softly in surprise at seeing her cut disappear in a matter of seconds. Then the two returned to sitting in silence. After a while, however, Cecil’s stomach growled. She pressed her hands over her stomach, blushing slightly in embarrassment. She had not had anything to eat since yesterday.

“I’m afraid this is all I have on me, but would you like some, milady?” Allen held out some molmo, dried jerky, and dried potatoes that he had retrieved from Storage.

“Where were you keeping *those*?” Cecil asked, giving him a weird look. However, her empty stomach won over her curiosity, so she did not press the matter.

While Cecil was engrossed with wolfing down the food, Allen continued keeping an eye on the vicinity, using Hawk Eye to ensure there were no hoodlums approaching their location.

Hmm, it’d be a problem if someone picks a fight with us her— Hm?

Allen’s thoughts were interrupted by the sound of Cecil’s sobs. Now that her stomach was filled, what happened in the dining hall yesterday had probably come back to mind. She repeatedly mumbled, “I don’t want to die” in a small voice.

I’ve never tried consoling an eleven-year-old girl before, but looks like I don’t have a choice.

“Lady Cecil.”

“What?”

“What do you think about not returning home and running away from this city with me? If memory serves me right, the magic ship should be arriving tomorrow, but if you prefer, we can travel by land too. There are many other fiefdoms in this country, right?”

“What?!” Cecil lifted her head to look at Allen’s face in surprise. Not only did he not try to talk her out of running away from home, he was even pushing the idea himself.

“You can forget your family. We can travel through so many different countries and visit so many different places. Imagine how fun it’d be!”

Though we’d be seeing a lot more monsters than we do cities. I just happen to need someone who can deal ranged damage.

The word “monster” usually carried the connotation of death, so Allen glossed over it with the word “places.” As it so happened, his Summons

could only fight in close quarters, so it would expand the breadth of the strategies he could take if someone like Cecil was to fight together with him.

“That’s impossible!”

“It’s entirely possible. If it’s money you’re worried about, I have plenty of it.” Allen started producing gold coins one after the other.

“That’s... Huh?!”

“Another option is to return to the mansion first and wait it out for one more year. Next year, we’ll both turn twelve and can register as adventurers. We could wait until then.”

“B-But the Academy...”

All this time, Cecil had grown up being told she would be going to Academy City when she turned twelve.

“I mean, you don’t *have* to go, right?”

“I don’t?”

“Even if someone tells you to go, if you don’t want to go, then you don’t have to go. What do you *want* to do, Lady Cecil? It’s your life. It’s your choice.”

“What I want to do...”

All Allen wanted to do was help Cecil see that she had a lot more options than she thought. The young girl fell silent as she mulled over what this meant, and Allen waited patiently for her. Perhaps it was the first time she had truly thought about what it was she wanted to do.

About an hour later, a commotion started approaching along the main avenue. Apparently, the search for Cecil was kicking up a notch. The sound of voices calling her name reached all the way down the alleyway to where she and Allen were.

“Allen.”

“Yes, milady?”

“I’m returning to the mansion.”

“Understood.”

“Give me a piggyback ride.”

“Of course.”

Allen turned around and knelt down, and Cecil clambered on. He then started walking out to the avenue.

“Allen.”

“Yes, milady?”

“Thank you.”

“Anything for you, milady.”

Cecil bashfully buried her face in Allen’s shoulder.

As soon as Allen emerged into the main avenue, his eyes met with a knight's. He informed the man that he had found Cecil, then turned to head straight back to the mansion. Word seemed to have gotten around, as when they were about halfway home, they stopped seeing knights running about.

It took quite a while to walk all the way back, but the mansion finally appeared up ahead. The baron and his entire family were waiting outside. Slightly before reaching them, Cecil asked Allen to let her down.

The baron rushed over and enveloped her in a hug. "Cecil!"

"I'm sorry for causing such a commotion, father."

"It's fine. It's fine, really."

"He's right. Cecil, you don't have to shoulder this by yourself," the baroness added, tears of joy streaming down her face.

The baron grabbed both of Cecil's shoulders and looked her straight in the eye. "I almost have everything ready. I'm so close."

"Huh?"

"The first mithril mine is going to be reopened very soon. I'm planning on offering a portion of the mining rights to the royal family in exchange for exempting you from your duty. I promise you I'll successfully negotiate it. So you have nothing to worry about. Nothing at all."

Perhaps this was what the baron had been trying to tell Cecil yesterday.

Ohhh, so that's why he was really pushing so hard to get the mines up and running.

Ever since the day that news had come of the white dragon moving away, the baron had seemed somewhat desperate about resuming mining operations. As it turned out, he was clinging to it as his ticket for saving the life of his beloved daughter.

"There's no need, father."

"What?"

"I, Cecil Granvelle, shall carry out my duty as a daughter of House Granvelle, just as my brother, Mihai Granvelle, did. I will no longer run from it."

In a quivering voice, the girl with crimson eyes clearly declared what it was that she wanted to do.

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Several days after the commotion raised by Cecil running away from home settled down, Allen once again visited Krena Village through a Shared Bird G. Ever since July the previous year, he had sent the parrot back home regularly to bring money to his parents. He had done it more than ten times by now.

Clink.

When the sound of the coin hitting the earthen floor rang out, Theresia turned around. "Oh, good morning, Pippi. You've brought us another one? And there's the letter too."

Its name is Chappy, mother.

“Pii!”

Right next to the gold coin at the bird’s feet was a sheet of parchment. It had held the gold coin in its beak and clasped the letter with its claws.

Theresia picked both up.

The third time Allen sent money back, he had sent Chappy all the way inside the house, so Theresia finally caught sight of the bird. Even since then, he had also included a letter with the coin.

The first letter had only said “Allen.” Although his parents were for the most part illiterate, they still knew how to read and write the names of their children. This was how they learned who the sender was.

“It’s Pippi!” Myulla, who was now four, rushed out to the earthen-floored room in an effort to catch Bird G. Even though Allen had set “Chappy” as its name, his family had taken to calling it “Pippi” instead.

Hah! There’s nothing you can do if you can’t catch it!

With more than 200 Agility, Bird G had no trouble zipping around the small room, elegantly evading Myulla’s lunges.

“Myulla, hon, settle down.”

“Okay, mommy.”

“Oh! Another letter! How’s my boy?” Rodin just happened to come home. He went straight over to the family water jug and took a long draft.

It was now time for lunch. Rodin, Theresia, Mash, and Myulla gathered around the dinner table. Despite having become commoners, they still lived in the same house and ate the same food.

“A letter came? Let me see!” Mash said, reaching out for the parchment that Pippi had brought.

Oh? Let’s see how much you’ve learned!

One reason Allen had started including a letter with the gold coin was to assuage his family’s suspicions about the money he was sending back. Another was because Mash had started learning how to read and write.

A tutor had arrived at the village last year to prepare Krena for the Academy’s entrance exam. She had two years to learn everything she needed to know. Thanks to the village chief’s arrangements, the tutor also agreed to teach a few more children at the same time, including Mash, Dogora, and Pelomas. Allen had not watched any of the lessons himself, but he had gleaned that the tutor was teaching reading, writing, and math. Every day, Mash came home with a parchment bearing words written by the tutor and read them out loud repeatedly, doing his best to commit them to memory.

Although he stumbled a few times, Mash managed to read the full letter out loud. “Father, mother, Mash, and Myulla, how are you doing? I am doing great. Father, don’t drink too much. Myulla, go to bed when mother tells you to. I will write another letter next time.”

Hey, he’s gotten pretty good at reading. Looks like his studies are going well. Honestly, I’m pretty sure that if father puts his mind to it, he’d be able to learn reading and writing pretty quickly too.

In this world, the Intelligence stat affected how well someone could remember things. Even if Rodin's Intelligence was ranked at D or E, considering how many levels he had gained from all the boar hunting he did, he should still have a much better memory than the average person. By Allen's estimate, he could probably learn how to read and write if he applied himself seriously for a year.

Mash turned to look at his sister. "Myulla, Allen told you to go to bed when mommy tells you to."

"But I do!" Myulla retorted in between bites of her steamed potato.

Rodin sighed a little. "Is Allen really doing all right? He keeps sending us so much money."

Even though Allen had said many times in his letters that he was making more than enough, his parents still worried about him. For both serfs and commoners, one gold was a lot of money. The truth, however, was that ever since he had started selling armored ant shells, Allen's monthly income, combined with his salary, exceeded ten gold. Sending one gold home was not all that much of a burden on him—conversely, he was holding himself back and keeping it at one gold in order to avoid causing undue worry.

Although he had not been able to do anything for his family in the first year and a half after becoming a manservant, thanks to Sharing, he could now do so with ease. There was no such thing as insurance in this world. Allen was hoping that this money could help tide his family over in case—knock on wood—anything happened to them.

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While Allen was enjoying time with his family while Sharing with Bird G, Cecil called out to him. It was lunchtime here at the Granvelle mansion too, and Allen was on serving duty.

"Allen, come to my room afterward."

"Understood, milady."

Cecil seemed to have pulled herself together over the past few days. Although she had not completely gotten over what had happened, she no longer showed signs of being so unstable as to run out of the house again. And ever since that day, her treatment of Allen seemed to have gotten slightly kinder. The way she spoke remained the same, but the way she looked at him had grown a little softer.

After lunch, Allen knocked on the door of Cecil's room. Upon hearing her "Come in!" from within, he pushed it open. Due to having just seen his family's home, the sight before his eyes looked a bit grander than it usually did. Cecil was sitting at a round table that was just the right size for two people to have tea at.

"Allen, good job finding me the other day."

"Thank you, milady."

"Come over here."

"Yes, milady."

When Allen reached the table, Cecil told him to take the seat across from hers, so he obliged. The table was loaded with tea and snacks that looked much fancier than what Cecil usually enjoyed.

"Allen, you've been my manservant for three years now. You even helped me out the other day. This is your reward."

Yay, snacks! Yay, reward! Funny, I didn't get a celebration last year, but I got one this year.

After Allen's first year as manservant, Cecil had offered him a reward. Thanks to her arrangements, he had gotten a lesson with her magic tutor. That was where he had learned how magic in this world worked and how it was related to the Intelligence stat.

Last year, Allen had planned on asking for the snacks he had forgone requesting for his first anniversary, but Cecil never brought the topic up. Allen thought she had forgotten about the anniversary or had gotten bored of giving out a reward after the first time, but here she was with a combined reward for his third anniversary and his service the other day.

"Go on, it's all yours," Cecil said, gesturing at the baked sweets.

"Thank you!" Allen, who had always had a sweet tooth, dug in with gusto, showing no sign of reserve despite being in front of Cecil. *IT'S SO GOOOOOD!*

During that time, Cecil explained that she had asked her father for an allowance and then paid the head chef that money to have him bake all this for Allen. In other words, these baked sweets were also partly a gesture of gratitude from the baron.

I never knew Mr. Dudley could bake something this delicious! As expected of a former royal court chef!

Upon learning that it was the head chef who had made the sweets he was now eating, Allen recalled how Rickel had told him previously that there were two people in this mansion who once used to serve in the royal court. One of them was Dudley, the head chef, who had worked there until he retired after turning fifty and came home to Granvelle. Allen remembered thinking, *How did someone with such a coarse tongue make it in the royal palace?* at the time.

The other person was Cecil's magic tutor. This elderly man who had taught Allen so much about magic had also come to serve at the Granvelle mansion after retiring from the royal court. However, unlike the head chef, Granvelle was not his hometown. The reason he was here in Granvelle City was entirely because of Cecil.

It was customary for noble families to hire a tutor for their children when they were identified as having a Talent for magic through the Appraisal Ceremony. If the Talent in question was only a one-star Talent, such as Mage, then a fellow Mage would suffice. However, Cecil possessed Wizardess, a rare two-star Talent. Back when the baron was looking for a tutor, he happened to hear of someone with the same Talent who was nearing retirement age and so approached him with an offer. Now, the

elderly man came around to the mansion once a week, spending the rest of the days in his house in the nobles quarter and enjoying his life after retirement.

"Allen, you don't have to worry."

"Hm?" What's she talking about?

Apparently, there was something that Cecil still wanted to talk about. Allen stopped his hand, which had been reaching out for another piece of baked confection, to listen to her.

"You mentioned becoming an adventurer when you were talking about the future. But don't worry."

Oh, she's talking about what I said to cheer her up back in the alleyway?

"You're very good at your job. I know. So I've told father to make you a gentleman-in-waiting as soon as possible."

You did what?!

The only thing Allen could say in response to Cecil's bright, innocent smile was, "You honor me too much, milady."

Chapter 11: Attacking an Armored Ant Nest

The year turned and March arrived. It had been half a year since Mihai's passing, and a fair bit of cheer had returned to Cecil. However, that did not mean she had forgotten—what had happened now served as fuel that drove her to pour herself into her studies.

At the same time, she had also developed a desire to be strong. She once ordered him, "Allen, bring me along on your hunts." Unfortunately, the baron did not give permission for this, so Allen had to turn her down.

Allen had already been serving at the mansion for three years and a half—six more months, and he would be turning twelve. Time had truly flown by. Even now, he did not know the details of the so-called "duty of House Granvelle" that had gotten Mihai killed. He had gone to double-check with Rickel, who had told him previously that the kingdom was not currently at war with any other countries, but Rickel confirmed that was still the case. While he was at it, Rickel also taught Allen a bit more about this world's history. Namely, their kingdom had been at war with the empire to its north that was dozens of times larger several decades ago, but the two had eventually signed a peace accord.

In regard to the progress of Allen's hunting, he had completely wiped out all orc villages at the end of February. It had taken longer to exterminate the orcs than the goblins, but in any case, the foothills of the White Dragon Mountains were now entirely free of both. There was a chance that the same monsters could wander in from outside of Granvelle territory to establish more villages again, but they could easily be exterminated as they cropped up.

Thanks to Allen and the chivalric order's efforts, the first mithril mine was to open in April, with the necessary number of miners and laborers already secured. Due to all the goblins and orcs being wiped out, quite a few adventurers had actually changed occupations. A part of Allen did feel bad that he practically robbed them of their livelihoods, but the human corpses that he kept finding in the monster villages convinced him beyond a doubt that exterminating them was truly the right thing to do.

Come spring, the settlers would move into the village that housed the furnaces for smelting mithril ore into mithril ingots. Then the mining would begin in earnest after summer. The mines were expected to operate at a deficit for the first few years in light of the cost of initial investment, but what truly mattered was simply the fact they would be up and operating.

One possible source of concern was Viscount Carnel. It was now two years and counting since the white dragon moved into his fiefdom, but he had not made so much as a peep. It was difficult to imagine how he could keep his realm running without the income from his mithril mines, and yet it

was equally impossible to imagine him coming crying to Baron Granvelle. This silence from him, therefore, seemed somewhat ominous. The baron was clearly aware of this, seeing how frequently he asked Sebas for reports on the situation in Carnel.

After erasing all the goblin and orc villages in the area, Allen still based his hunting activities in the foothills of the White Dragon Mountains. On the other side of the forest, above the treeline, was a desolate wasteland only sparsely dotted with greenery where the mountain range, which extended far into the distance and sprawled over an unbelievable expanse, loomed in all its majestic glory. Allen only had a limited view from his position at the top of a bare cliff, but what he saw with his own eyes felt much more awe-inspiring than the more comprehensive view that he got through Sharing with a Bird E.

So, that's an armored ant nest.

A slight distance away from Allen's current position lay a large bulge in the mountain slope that looked like an igloo. This was the entrance to an armored ant nest. Many armored ants, monsters that towered three meters in height, busily flowed through the entrance in an unending stream.

Hm, the entrance is pretty small. Oh, no, it's the armored ants that are too big. I'm not sure there's space for me to slip in with all these guys going in and out nonstop.

The width of the tunnel could only accommodate the passage of one armored ant. This was plenty of space for a human to go through, but even if he managed to infiltrate the place, the ants could easily seal his path with their bodies alone.

Of course, Allen had asked Raven to share everything he knew about killing armored ants. First, the adventurer had explained that most nests held roughly a thousand armored ants, give or take. Next, it was guaranteed that there would be a queen armored ant, a Rank B monster, within. This monster absolutely needed to be killed, or else it would continue to spawn more and more armored ants. Unfortunately, this was all the info that Raven had—Allen attempted to press him for more details, but Raven replied that his info was only secondhand this time, and he himself did not know much else.

So the tunnels inside are all one-way only? Isn't it inconvenient having such tiny holes? Hmm, I should probably lure as many armored ants outside as I can to kill them out here. That's the only way I'll be able to go inside to get at the queen.

Allen called out four Beast Ds, one Insect D, and one Fish D, then Shared with all of them.

Well, let's first give it a try and see how it goes.

This world had neither walkthrough sites nor online forums. Thus, Allen had to try attacking with his Summons to see for himself how well this group composition would fare against the armored ants. Of course, having

learned his lesson from the orc village that he failed to take down, Allen now kept himself back a safe distance away.

The group of six Summons wove their way around the bare boulders, making their way toward the anthill entrance. The Beast Ds were soon spotted due to their huge size, but they continued on regardless.

Once they got close, one armored ant raised its large jaws up high and clacked them loudly in warning. Other nearby ants heard this and headed over, adding to the cacophony with their own furious clacking. This prompted several dozen more to appear from within the nest and take up defensive positions around the entrance.

Yes, keep coming out! I love where this is going. Please come out, every last one of you. All right, six Summons is clearly not enough to deal with these numbers. Let's get more out there.

In response to the situation, Allen called out twenty more Beast Ds, all of them Strengthened ahead of time. He ordered them to charge toward the armored ant nest.

Soon, the area fell into a battlefield. As armored ants' heads were slightly more breakable than their shells, all the Beast Ds knew to aim for their heads. This was what Allen had always told them to do during the previous hunts, so now he no longer needed to mention it—they just did it by default. And so the Beast Ds got to work cracking heads.

Hmm, their teamwork really leaves a lot to be desired.

The most important thing in hunting was the amount of time taken to kill each monster. The efficiency of battle was directly determined by the number of monsters taken down. Allen was currently watching the battle from over fifty meters away using a Bird E with Hawk Eye activated. The Beast Ds charged fiercely and were making good progress culling the ants, but there was a glaring problem that had come to light from their facing such a large number of enemies at once.

Beast Ds were incapable of crushing the heads of armored ants in one attack, even while using their Ability. This meant the most efficient way for them to fight was to coordinate with each other and focus on bringing down one enemy at a time. Unfortunately, this was not going so well.

Whenever Allen saw a Beast D attacking an armored ant, he ordered another one to also focus its attacks on that same monster. However, in large-scale protracted fights where he could not micromanage the movements of every Summon and had to rely on them to make their own decisions, holes appeared very quickly among the ranks, leading to unnecessarily wasted time. For example, say there was an armored ant that would die with just one more attack, but the closest Beast D turned to attack another one that was closer and ended up getting attacked by the first armored ant. Similar instances started cropping up more and more, much to Allen's chagrin.

So basically, Summons with barely more than 100 Intelligence end up making quite a lot of bad calls and can't effectively cooperate with each other.

The longer the fight dragged on, the more mistakes the Summons made. It grew so obvious that Allen would almost believe it if he were told the Summons had been designed to make a certain percentage of incorrect decisions. He first thought this was an issue that could be solved with thorough training, but soon arrived at the conclusion that it was the Intelligence stat that was to blame. It was when he saw Bird D and Fish D—both of which had over 400 Intelligence after being Strengthened—communicating flawlessly that the idea had occurred to him. Bird D only knew how to say "Hoo!" whereas Fish D could not speak at all. And yet, somehow, the two were capable of picking up each other's intentions and acting in coordination.

I guess this is basically how it is? Though I don't have a Summon with around 300 Intelligence, so I'll just fill the line with whatever.

Results of Testing Summons with Varying Intelligence:

- Less than 100 Intelligence: Only reacts to the order to use its Ability
- Above 100 Intelligence: Can comprehend normal orders and the order to use its Ability, but makes bad decisions and cannot communicate with other Summons
- Above 200 Intelligence: Fewer mistakes in judgment
- Above 300 Intelligence: Cannot be tested due to absence of corresponding Summons
- Above 400 Intelligence: Can communicate with other Summons and, when Shared, can pass along Allen's orders

As a result of his experiments, Allen discovered that if he Shared with a Bird D with over 400 Intelligence, the Bird D could help pass instructions on to other Summons. In this way, he could remotely instruct Summons that he was not Shared with. However, this was effectively a game of telephone, relayed from Allen to Bird D to, say, Beast D. The instructions had to be extremely simple, otherwise they would get distorted in the process.

Allen occupied himself by considering the possibilities opened up by this discovery while watching the fight taking place at the entrance of the armored ant nest.

□□□

Two months had passed since Allen first began assaulting the armored ant nest, but he had yet to take it down. He was currently in the village that had been set up in the foothills of the White Dragon Mountains for smelting mithril. It was still a rather barren place, as development had only begun in April.

A man who was carrying timber together with Allen called out to him, "Looks like you're pretty strong, lad."

“Thank you, mister.”

Naturally, Allen was not here to help build the village. No, he was here to continue his assault on the armored ant nest. He had killed more than two hundred armored ants each day twice a week over the past five weeks, which brought his kill count above two thousand. If the info from Raven about there being a thousand armored ants in a nest was true, he should have been done ages ago. So what was going on?

If it just so happened that the first nest he ever attacked was a large one, then fine—even if there were three thousand or five thousand armored ants, killing them all was simply a matter of time. However, there was one thing that was bothering Allen: every time he approached the nest again for another day of hunting, the two hundred corpses from the previous day would be completely gone. He suspected that the queen armored ant might be consuming the corpses as nutrition in order to continue spawning more.

One might think, “Easy! Just move the corpses away, then!” but that was much easier said than done. As the monsters rushed out of the nest in an unending stream, it was difficult even harvesting the corpses for magic stones, much less dragging them away somewhere. The efficiency for grinding XP here was absolutely unparalleled compared to any prior methods or targets, but the monetary reward was pretty much zero.

In light of all this, Allen had gone to Sebas in mid-April with a request. He was not sure if the butler would say yes, but he knew through his talk with Zenof that the man had already been making various concessions on his behalf.

What Allen asked for was to make his huntsman days and days off consecutive, and to allow him to stay out during the night in between. Even he, with all his level-ups and buffs, found the distance between Granvelle City and the location of the armored ant nest quite far. The long commute was making it difficult for him to get in as much hunting as he wanted.

At first, Sebas frowned at the mention of staying out. Just as he was about to say no, however, Allen offered to help out at the mithril smelting village. So, he eventually ended up giving the green light. When Allen mentioned this to Rickel later, the head manservant looked quite surprised and asked how Allen managed to make it happen. Apparently, staying out was generally forbidden. It turned out that the butler had bent the rules for Allen’s sake once again.

Schedule Before the Change: Service / Service / Huntsman / Service / Service / Day Off

Schedule After the Change: Service / Service / Service / Service / Day Off / Huntsman

Being able to dedicate two consecutive days to hunting was such a step up that even if Allen dedicated several hours to helping out at the village, he

still came out ahead. Thanks to cutting out one round of his commute, his daily kill count rose from two hundred to three.

Today, after putting in a few hours at the village, he was once again at the armored ant nest. And this time, the fight was finally going to proceed much differently. Namely, armored ants had stopped coming out of the nest.

I did it! My persistence finally won out! Take that, you stupid insects!

Keeping at this for two consecutive days ever since mid-April had finally paid off. The three-meter-wide entrance to the anthill gaped wide open as if inviting Allen in.

I've got to strike while the iron's hot. I have torches and magic tools for illumination with me, but let's send in a few Summons first.

Scouting the location out before heading in only made sense. What's more, to avoid getting lost, Allen wanted to confirm where the queen armored ant was and to figure out the most direct way to reach her. Knowing and not knowing sometimes made all the difference.

Now, who should I send in? Chappy? No, it'll probably be dark inside, so Horo's the best bet. Poor Chappy, I still haven't been able to use it for much.

Upon leveling up as a Summoner, Allen gained more and more useful skills, with Sharing being the latest one. He was continually considering ways to make the most out of each Summon's Ability in light of what each new skill brought to the table. Bird G's Ability, Voice Mimic, was one of the Abilities that suddenly got a lot more handy with the addition of Sharing.

Voice Mimic Effect: Mimic someone's voice
Conditions: Have heard the target's voice and know the target's name

Back when he did not yet have Sharing, Allen had to give detailed instructions for whose voice to mimic and what to say from within fifty meters. That was incredibly inconvenient, but the inconvenience was completely resolved thanks to Sharing, suddenly making the Ability much, much more useful. Now, Allen could give Chappy continuous instructions on who to sound like and what to say no matter how far away he was. The possibilities had expanded greatly, but unfortunately, he had yet to find any opportunities to actually make use of this Ability.

During the time Allen was deep in thought, Bird D had continued making its way deeper and deeper into the anthill.

Oh wow, it's really big inside. One Horo alone won't be enough.

As could be expected of a nest that had been home to over a thousand ants, the place turned out to be an expansive labyrinth. The passages branched out countless ways, with the tunnels stretching on endlessly. To make the process go faster so as to take advantage of this opportunity to get at the queen armored ant, Allen sent in three more Bird Ds. All the

areas that the four Horos passed through were immediately mapped onto a page in Allen's grimoire.

I see, there's a small room h— Oof, one Horo got done in!

The anthill was not entirely empty, as could be expected. A Bird D had just entered a dead-end chamber when it was suddenly caught by large mandibles and crushed to death. In the split second before it died, Allen had caught sight of three armored ants. There were still quite a few armored ants lurking about inside the nest.

I ain't giving up, though! Hmm...

Allen pondered how to conquer this ant colony. He was currently Shared with the three Bird Ds still inside, plus the one Bird D that he had just Summoned to replace the one that had died. Their number could be maintained by Creating more any time one got done in while they continued pushing farther down the gently sloping passages in their effort to completely map the place. Whenever that happened, Allen made a mark on the map and sent over the mixed force of three Beast Ds and one Bird D that he had roaming in the nest to wipe out the forces in the area. Naturally, he was Sharing with them too, for a total of eight Summons that he was concurrently Shared with. He slowly but steadily exterminated all the monsters remaining within this way. The small larvae that the Summons encountered every once in a while in the chambers were also mercilessly stomped out.

As there was no light at all inside the tunnels, the Beast Ds were moving in total darkness. The vision that Allen Shared with them was also entirely blacked out. He was relying on the Bird D that accompanied their group to observe their surroundings so that he knew what instructions to give the Beast Ds.

When Allen had first started in the morning, progress had been smooth. However, the armored ants hardly just sat around idly. In the afternoon, they started showing up in greater numbers.

Ugh, another Horo got hemmed in again.

The passages were only barely large enough for armored ants to pass through. As such, they would become practically blocked every time an ant showed up, making it impossible for Allen's Summons to keep going. Every time a Bird D found its way blocked by an armored ant after turning back from a dead end, since there was no way it could kill the monster by itself, Allen had no choice but to revert it into card form. Summons that were returned to card form from afar—thanks to Sharing—automatically made their way back into the grimoire's holders. Then he had to re-Summon and send them out once more.

As soon as the Beast Ds encountered an armored ant, no matter if it was in a passage or a chamber, they killed it. But that was the easy part. Because the corpse that remained was in the way, the Summons then had to use their jaws to hold it by its crushed head and push or pull it to

somewhere they could discard it, such as at a dead end or a small room. Only after this could they continue exploring.

This almost feels like a puzzle game. Is this what clearing an armored ant nest is supposed to be like?

Back when Allen had been Kenichi, he had played games that had other simpler games within, called minigames. For example, even though the game itself was an adventure game, for some reason, it would feature, say, a quiz competition or dice board games. Clearing the armored ant nest was giving him the same feeling.

Just how long would he continue this puzzle minigame for? In any case, the sun was about to set when a Bird D finally emerged into the largest cavern in the anthill. Inside were ten armored ants all clumped up together around another ant that was clearly different from the rest. This special monster was roughly three times as long as a normal armored ant and had a caterpillar-like torso that protruded from underneath its shell, expanding and contracting rhythmically.

This must be the queen armored ant! There's no doubt!

Apparently this cavern was the deepest part of this nest. After marking down the location on the map, Allen reverted all the deployed Summons to card form.

This should do for the composition of the strike force. If they end up struggling, I can increase my Intelligence to raise the number of Summons I'm able to Share with.

Vanguard Strike Force Against a Queen Armored Ant

- Beast D x 6
- Bird D x 1
- Insect D x 1

A Fish D buffed all eight Summons, then Allen Shared with them and sent them into the nest. He also Summoned a few more Beast Ds and ordered them to follow along behind the previous group, but this did not work out, as they were unable to see in the dark. There was no choice but to attempt the fight only with the Summons that he was Sharing with.

The strike force followed the twists and turns of the nest, traveling down countless branches. They walked for more than five kilometers total before finally reaching their destination. The monsters within had remained in the same positions as before.

In boss fights, it's common sense to go for the weaker mobs first. The same applies in this world.

Allen ordered the Beast Ds to first focus on taking down the normal armored ants. This cavern was naturally shrouded in complete darkness, but Allen—and his Summons, by extension—still had visual thanks to Bird D using Night Vision. Once three Beast Ds got done in, Allen Summoned replacements and sent them down. Just like fighting orc kings, he was

relying on sheer numbers to overwhelm the enemy. And once again, the strategy paid off.

Okay, that's all the small fry taken care of. It's time for me to head down in person so I can get within fifty meters and Summon a whole bunch at once.

Even at the end of Allen's campaign against the orc villages, he needed to send more than a hundred Beast Ds to kill one orc king. The Summons surrounded the monster to continuously attack it from all sides, with plenty of replacements ready to step up and take the places of those that got killed. Allen intended on using the same strategy this time, but because the battlefield was five kilometers underground, he had to go down himself.

To save time, Allen brought only a Bird D and two Beast Ds along as he charged into the nest. As he could not see a thing inside, he relied solely on the Night Vision sight that he was Sharing with the Bird D. It gave him a much clearer view than a torch or illumination magic tool would have.

I almost feel like I'm controlling my own body in over-the-shoulder mode.

Even while Allen himself was dashing through the passages, the remaining Beast Ds down below continued attacking the queen armored ant.

She isn't all that fast, but it looks like aiming for her head is quite dangerous.

The monster's head was covered with a tough exoskeleton and equipped with giant, vicious mandibles. There was no reason to insist on aiming for that part when the monster's soft abdomen protruded from its shell. Consequently, the three remaining Beast Ds focused their attacks on the abdomen, using Crush repeatedly. In response, the queen shuddered violently, slamming one of the Beast Ds against the far wall and reducing it to bubbles of light with one powerful strike of her mandibles.

Oof, one down. But I think we've got this. It's taking her way too long to kill a single Beast D.

The queen armored ant's Agility was clearly far lower than that of an orc king, which could move incredibly fast *and* wield a halberd. Before long, Allen reached the large cavern where the battle was taking place.

The enemy is moving sluggishly! Teddys, CHAAAARGE!

"ROOOOAAAAARRRRRR!"

The twenty-plus Beast Ds that Allen Summoned all at once roared at the top of their lungs, shaking the cavern, before thundering forward as a single wave of muscles, fangs, and claws. The enemy was superior in rank and the Beast Ds could not see for themselves, but the target was huge, and after figuring out where it was, the Beast Ds began spamming their Ability. Every time the queen armored ant shuddered, one of the Summons got punted to the wall of the cavern. But their attacks still fell like relentless and inexorable rain.

Is this all a queen armored ant can do? This isn't as challenging as I expected.

Soon, one of the Summons dealt the killing blow. The monster's long torso tore open, spilling white liquid all over the ground.

"Clack clack clack!"

The queen armored ant raised her head high and screamed loudly, then fell over. Her body's convulsions ended up causing more white liquid to gush out.

<You have defeated 1 queen armored ant. You have earned 45,000 XP.>

Ah, she died.

It was a bit anticlimactic how easily the boss monster itself died, but the clearing of the nest had taken a whole day. Even if Allen headed back to Granvelle City now, the gates would probably be closed by the time he arrived. In other words, he would have to stay at the village for another night.

Ugh, tonight's gonna be an unexcused night out. I hope Mr. Sebas doesn't get mad at me for it. Would apologizing the way Mr. Rickel does lessen my sentence?

Allen had feared that if he did not press the attack today and left halfway through, the armored ants might recover their numbers. To prevent that from happening, he had prioritized killing the queen armored ant, but an infraction was an infraction. He recalled how he had seen Rickel apologize before and imagined himself doing the same.

But for now, let's strip away the queen armored ant's shell. Then I'll bring it back and apologize.

There was little point in overthinking things. Allen produced the illuminating magic tool from Storage and twisted the dial to turn it on. It was true that he could see through Bird D's Night Vision, but it was hard to see what he was doing from over his shoulder. Harvesting was best done with his own eyes.

When Allen approached the monster to confirm its state, a powerful stench assaulted his nose.

Ugh, that stinks so bad!

The sour, acidic smell was coming from the fluids that had leaked from the queen armored ant. It was so intense that Allen thought he would be hit with a debuff from smelling it one too many times.

Still, it was pretty strange how sluggish the boss's movements were. Was she under the weather today?

As the queen armored ant was classified as a Rank B monster, Allen had expected it to be as formidable as a murdergalsh. The actual fight, however, had ended in no time at all. He mulled over whether this specific monster just happened to be a weak one or if it was the species as a whole.

Oh! Is it because she was exhausted from laying too many eggs?

Over the past two months, Allen had killed more than five thousand armored ants. If what Raven had said about a nest being home to around a thousand was true, that meant this queen had birthed more than four thousand eggs in that short period of time. Perhaps exhaustion was the reason she had died so easily.

Hmm, so monsters need to eat and sleep, and can become weakened. The Bird Ds did find pupa and eggs throughout the nest too. Catching them when they're not in perfect condition can make a big difference.

This was basically Allen's takeaway for the day.

All right, let's get the harvesting done and head back.

Not wanting to stay down there any longer than necessary, Allen got to work. Thanks to his beloved mithril sword, harvesting the queen armored ant went easily. It did not take long before he had secured both the magic stone and shell.

Oh right, mithril ore. That's important. I should look around a bit.

It was said that there was a possibility there were exposed mithril ore veins in the tunnels inside an armored ant nest. For all he knew, there might be one in this very cavern.

Well, this should do.

He had never seen mithril before, so he grabbed ten lumps of rock that seemed reflective under the light of his magic tool and threw them into Storage to include in his report to Sebas afterward.

Okay, time to go.

Having finished doing everything he needed to do, Allen started making his way back upward, dragging the queen armored ant's shell behind him. After staying at the smelting village for another night, he then returned to Granvelle City the next morning.

It was around noon when he finally reached the mansion. Right before turning the final corner, he took out the rocks that might or might not be mithril, put them into a jute bag, and slung the bag over his shoulder.

First things first: apologize to Mr. Sebas.

Allen had wanted to get a one-on-one with the butler first thing to apologize for staying out last night without permission. However, it turned out Sebas had already headed to the dining room on the second floor. So Allen left the queen armored ant's shell in the garden and headed up.

"Please excuse me," he said as he entered the dining room. Everyone within turned to look at him.

Cecil was the first to react. "Do you know how late you are, Allen?!"

"I'm truly sorry, milady. I am back now."

It was the baron, not Sebas, who questioned Allen. "Allen, tell us why you could not make it back yesterday."

"Yes, my lord. I have been attacking the same armored ant nest in the foothills of the White Dragon Mountains for the past two months. Yesterday, my efforts finally paid off, and I saw it as an opportunity to get at the queen armored ant. I was worried that if I did not press my attack, she would

spawn more armored ants again. So I prioritized killing her and finished too late in the night to make it back in time. I am deeply sorry."

After explaining his circumstances, Allen bowed with his waist at a ninety-degree angle. This was the Rickel-style apology that he had seen being used quite often.

"Hm? Did you say *queen* armored ant?"

"Yes, my lord. I brought her shell back. It's in the garden right now."

The baron looked at Sebas with a blank face. Sebas, in turn, returned the look with a blank expression of his own. The two of them continued looking at each other blankly for a few more moments before the baron turned back toward Allen.

"I'm sorry, Allen. I'm afraid I did not quite catch the meaning of what you just said. Could you repeat it to me one more time?"

I thought I was pretty clear in my explanation. Is he angry at me? I'm not sure I get it, but I guess I'll do it again more thoroughly.

After Allen went through the account of what had happened once more, the baron, who still looked very confused, attempted to sum the entire story up in his own words.

"So, you're saying that you defeated a queen armored ant and completely cleared out an armored ant nest?"

Yay, he finally got it! "Yes, my lord."

The baron looked at Sebas again. "Summon Zenof for me. I know he just returned last night and is likely tired, but tell him that this is urgent and he is needed immediately."

"Understood, Master!"

Hm? What for? I've already told Captain Zenof that I've been attacking that armored ant nest.

That one night Allen had spent camping out with the chivalric order after the whole orc village incident, Captain Zenof had asked him to share the details of his hunting activities whenever he visited the mansion. Ever since then, Allen had ensured that he kept the knight captain in the loop. Although the man was often away, Allen remembered clearly informing him two months ago that he had wiped out all the orc villages and was now moving on to attacking armored ant nests.

"And Allen, you mentioned bringing back a queen armored ant's shell?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Then let us take a look at this shell while waiting for Zenof to arrive."

Oh? Am I already forgiven? The Rickel-style apology really worked!

Allen led everyone to the garden, secretly rejoicing at the fact that the baron never veered back to the topic of his staying out without permission. Just as he had said, there lay the gigantic pink-gold shell that he had harvested from the queen armored ant. The shell of normal armored ants was silver, so the difference was obvious at a glance.

The baron nodded repeatedly and went “Hmm” while touching the shell all over. Thomas followed suit, his curiosity piqued, when Sebas returned from calling for Zenof.

“Master, Captain Zenof said he would be here shortly.”

“Good. By the way, Sebas, Allen claims that this is the shell of a queen armored ant. Have you ever seen another before?”

“I-I’m sorry, Master. Unfortunately, I am not too familiar with monsters.”

Mm? Oh, queen armored ants are quite rare, I imagine, what with being Rank B, plus living so deep inside the nest. Are they summoning Captain Zenof because they have no way to verify my claim themselves?

After admitting that he had no idea whether this was truly the shell of a queen armored ant either, Sebas also reached out with curiosity to touch it all over. Before long, the knight captain rushed into the mansion.

“May I ask why I have been summoned with such urgency, Your Lordship?”

Both his clothes and his hair look really well-groomed for someone who had been suddenly called over at an hour when everyone’s normally lounging about after lunch.

“I apologize for interrupting your rest, Zenof. There is something I need you to confirm for me. Is this a shell from a queen armored ant?”

“A…queen armored ant, my lord?”

Zenof approached to take a look, but then shook his head. “I’m sorry, my lord. I have never seen a queen armored ant myself.”

“Allen tells us that this is the shell of a queen armored ant. My memory might be fuzzy, as I heard this quite far in the past, but aren’t armored ant nests supposedly unclearable?”

Huh? Unclearable? Not just difficult to clear, but outright impossible?

“Yes, my lord. It is impossible to clear an armored ant nest. Even if our entire order was to be dispatched, we would not be able to do it. I believe it is beyond Silver Fang of the Gale as well.”

Hearing how certain Zenof had sounded, Allen inadvertently blurted, “But armored ants are only Rank C, right?”

Silver Fang of the Gale was the name of a Rank A adventurer party. Allen had difficulty understanding how even a Rank A adventurer party would struggle against Rank C monsters. *How could anything be impossible for Rank A adventurers and the knight captain?*

“Well, that’s because…”

To sum up Zenof’s explanation, clearing an armored ant nest involved killing more than a thousand armored ants that would keep emerging in a seemingly endless flood.

I mean, yes, that’s how it was for me too. Though it was over five thousand in my case.

Zenof continued to explain that his chivalric order would suffer severe casualties if they really had to fight more than a thousand Rank C monsters without rest. What’s more, killing a queen armored ant meant going into a

nest with all its countless branching passages and finding the cavern where she resided. The monsters still remaining within the nest would use their bodies to seal the passages, especially when the exploration party was turning back from a dead end. The party could kill the ant that was in the way, but its body would remain, leaving them still trapped. Then only death awaited, as it was nigh impossible for another group to find them within the labyrinth.

Ah, that's true. My Summons did get trapped quite a few times. Every time it happened, Allen had simply recalled the trapped Summons by reverting them to card form and then sent them back out right away.

"For all these reasons, clearing an armored ant nest is, for all practical purposes, impossible. If someone really had to clear one, the question would be one of how many casualties the process would incur. However, this is entering the realm of academic deliberation. In any case, I have never heard of an armored ant nest ever being cleared before."

No one, be they knight or adventurer, would willingly step into an armored ant nest. Over the past year or so, the chivalric order had been mobilized only to deal with goblin and orc villages. There had been no mention whatsoever of attacking ant nests.

Allen looked confused. "Huh? But I heard that some of the mithril mines that we currently have used to be armored ant nests."

"The queens in those nests happened to die. Then the armored ants abandoned them of their own accord."

After hearing this explanation, Allen finally understood the blank look that the baron and the butler had exchanged. If there was no one attempting to clear these nests, then obviously there were no accounts of anyone having succeeded. The two of them had been bewildered by the report of a feat that they had understood to be absolutely impossible.

"So that's what happened. Oh, right. The shell isn't the only thing I brought back. I also have these."

Allen lowered the sack that he had forgotten about from his shoulder and took out one of the rocks inside.

"What is this?"

"I picked this up in the cavern where the queen armored ant was. I was wondering if it might be mithril ore."

Everyone's heads snapped around as they exclaimed, "WHAT?!"

Now, *this* they understood, much more than all the talk about the queen armored ant and nest clearing. The baron and knight captain both walked over briskly and peered closely at the rock.

"Allen, tell me the rest in the conference room," the baron ordered, beckoning Allen to follow along as he, Sebas, and Zenof headed to the third floor together.

"So, can you empty the contents of your bag on the table for us?"

"Yes, my lord."

Allen was a little hesitant to place the rocks that might possibly be dirtied with the queen armored ant's bodily fluids on top of the stately, antique-looking table, but he had no choice but to follow a direct order.

The baron promptly stepped out of the room, quickly returning with a heavy-looking lump in his hands.

"This is mithril ore."

Whoa! There's the lord of a realm that used to thrive on mithril mining for you. I guess it only makes sense that he has a sample.

The mithril ore was placed right next to Allen's rocks. They both gave off the same luster and had identical textures.

"They…look the same," Allen commented.

"So they do," the baron replied. "Sebas, bring me a map."

The butler fetched a map of Granvelle from another room. This was not Allen's first time seeing a map in this world, as Zenof had previously brought one out when the two discussed their relative progress in wiping out the orc villages. Upon being asked, Allen was able to point to the location of the armored ant nest that he had just cleared, indicating that it was somewhere between the two northernmost mines.

"I see. It's quite close to the village we're developing," the baron murmured, stroking his beard.

Zenof agreed, then said, "I strongly believe that we should be dispatched with haste to secure it before other monsters move in."

Despite having just returned to town, the knight captain was proposing that he and his men set off again immediately.

"Oh, right," Allen interrupted, having remembered something else that he had yet to report. "If I may have a sheet of paper, I can draw a simplified illustration of the entire layout of this nest."

It was simply a matter of copying over the finished map in his grimoire, so Allen did not think much of it. This was, after all, a labyrinth more than five kilometers long. Having a map, even a simple one, would make an enormous difference for those who would be managing the place.

"You mean it?! Bring him a large piece of parchment immediately!" the baron barked.

However, instead of immediately heading out, Sebas said, "Master, this would be a good time to give Allen an explanation about the mining rights."

"Mm, I know. I'll do it now," the baron replied before turning to Allen. "Allen, you have done incredibly good work today. Naturally, you will not be penalized for the unauthorized night out."

"Thank you, my lord."

"As for this mithril vein, the credit for its discovery goes to you."

"Thank…you, my lord?"

"In this country, those who discover a source of a natural resource—not just limited to mithril—are granted thirty percent of the harvesting rights."

"That much, my lord?"

“Indeed. As such, thirty percent of the harvesting rights for this mithril mine goes to you, Allen.”

Seriously?! Damn, I feel like I just figured out a way to get filthy rich in this world. I see, harvesting rights, huh?

According to the explanation that followed, the actual amount that would enter Allen’s pockets was a lot less than thirty percent of the full profits. First of all, the revenue from the mithril would be used to pay for all costs associated with the mining operation, including the maintenance of the mine, construction and maintenance of the furnaces needed to smelt the ore into ingots, and the personnel expenses for the knights, miners, laborers, and guards. Sixty percent of the remaining amount would then go to the royal treasury as tax. The amount actually left after all the abovementioned subtractions was what the term “harvesting rights” referred to. *This* was the sum that Allen would be receiving thirty percent of, with the other seventy going to the feudal lord.

In this way, Allen managed to gain thirty percent of the mining rights of a mithril mine at the young age of eleven years old.

Chapter 12: Assault

October arrived, and Allen finally turned twelve. This month marked his fourth anniversary here at the Granvelle mansion. During the past five months, the chivalric order had assumed supervision over the armored ant nest that he had cleared, and in September, the northernmost mithril mine finally began operations. Mine development for the vein Allen had discovered would begin next year. Specialist miners had taken a look at it and confirmed that this was indeed a brand new vein that no one else had happened upon before. It was expected to be a very *rich* vein, at that.

When the knight captain had saved him at the orc village, Allen had realized how much freedom he had been given to do what he wanted. The number of hours he spent hunting had shot up ever since he had obtained Sharing. And next year, the mining rights he held would enable him to live a comfortable life without even having to lift a finger.

Back when he lived in Krena Village, there was something that he had desperately lacked: status. In a desperate bid to raise his family's social class, he had hunted albaherons en masse and spearheaded changes to the great boar hunting party. Despite being unable to leave the village as he pleased, it had still been a very fulfilling time.

Now, though, he felt like he was just hunting slimes around the starter castle. He had more than enough money to live off of, and the monsters he fought posed no threat to him; all he was doing was grinding to the level cap without any particular goal in mind.

My mining rights… Almost feels like excess flab.

What Allen sought was not a cushy life. He had come to this world in search of excitement, something that could clutch his attention and consume his every waking thought. What he now had was *not* what he wanted. Partly due to these thoughts, when he went on to clear two more armored ant nests and realized they were not mithril mines, he did not feel particularly disappointed.

When he arrived at the mansion at eight years old, he had planned on becoming an adventurer. Then Mihai had asked him to protect Cecil, and Allen had said, "Yes." He still fully intended on keeping this promise, but now that he had turned twelve, he was also thinking it was about time for him to embark on the next phase of his life. This life of grinding "slimes" around the starter castle could not be the right answer for him.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Rickel asked.

Allen roused himself. "My apologies, sir."

The two were currently sharing breakfast together, just as they had for the past four years. Next year, Rickel would be quitting as head manservant to become either a coachman or a cook. The position of head manservant was not one that could be held for several decades, and it was high time he passed it on to someone else.

He was currently musing with Allen about which would be the easier profession in his usual flippant tone. Allen thought this a very Rickel-like question to ask. When he looked at this superior of his, he wondered if maybe he was the one overthinking his life.

"I heard the royal envoy's coming again," Rickel said, changing the subject. "I'm starting to get tired of all this talk about mithril, honestly."

"So I've been told," Allen replied. "Even though he came just last month."

Visits from a royal envoy were hardly unusual, but their frequency had jumped up significantly over the past year. Many of these had been to confirm the progress of preparations for the mithril mining operation, with there being a noticeably pressing tone in their questioning. Allen wondered if it was due to a shortage of mithril in the kingdom now that Carnel was no longer able to produce any.

The advance notice that came the other day included the date and time the envoy would be arriving, but not the nature of his business. Sebas had told Allen to stay in the dining hall after lunch, as part of the service staff that would be on hand during the audience.

The baron's family had lunch, then two men arrived at the Granvelle mansion around 1 p.m. When Sebas escorted them into the dining hall, the baron gasped. Not because of the royal envoy; it was usually the same one who came every time, and even Allen had seen him multiple times by now. What caught the baron by surprise was the identity of the royal envoy's companion. He knew this person, and he was much more than a mere passing acquaintance.

The royal envoy was visiting together with Viscount Carnel.

"Welcome," the baron said, keeping a straight face. He had allowed his wife and children to sit in for today's audience as he had expected it to be about the mithril mines again. If he had known the viscount was coming, he would have handled this visit on his own.

"I have heard that you apply yourself to your fiefdom's development with such eagerness and vigor. You are a true model for the other nobles," the envoy began, insolently leaning back into his seat and staring at the baron from across the table.

Ugh, this envoy's as arrogant as always.

Instead of sitting, Viscount Carnel was standing behind the envoy, almost as if he were the man's attendant. The positioning looked just like how Sebas stood behind the baron.

"May I ask what is the nature of your visit today, my lord?" the baron asked respectfully, a tinge of wariness in his tone.

The envoy grunted. After a pregnant pause, he answered, "I've come to bring you a proposal, Baron Granvelle."

"A proposal, my lord?"

“That’s right. You are involved in a dispute that is well-known even among the nobles. So what I bring today is a proposal to resolve that dispute.”

“What dispute might that be, my lord?” The baron racked his brains, but nothing came to mind.

“The centuries-old dispute between House Granvelle and House Carnel. This is an issue that even the royal family cannot overlook. A reconciliation must be achieved.”

“That’s…”

When speaking of a dispute between these two families, only one thing came to mind: the mithril mines in the White Dragon Mountains. It was true that this was an issue that had hung like a shadow over both houses for generations. The two realms constantly cycled between prosperity and decline in turn, forever at the mercy of the white dragon.

“And so I’ve brought this today.”

The viscount walked forward with a rolled-up parchment in hand. Sebas met him in the middle and accepted it with both hands, then brought it back and placed it before the baron.

“Wh-What is this?”

“Read it.”

The baron undid the string and spread the scroll open. As his eyes flowed across the page, however, shock filled his face.

“This is simply…”

“Mm? Do you take issue with this solution that I have gone to the trouble of arranging?”

“But, my lord, shared management of the White Dragon Mountains is just…”

“Just what? The two realms being divided by the mountain range is the cause of their dispute. As such, both can share management over the whole mountain. Naturally, profits will also be split equally.”

“Shared management”? As in, both the baron and viscount will have equal claim to the entire mountain range? Damn. So that’s why the viscount’s smirking so much.

What the royal envoy had brought was a contract for House Granvelle and House Carnel to share ownership over the White Dragon Mountain Range. The man proceeded to describe how the two families would share both the burden of maintenance and the profits obtained. From his position behind the envoy, Viscount Carnel was clearly having trouble hiding the smile on his face. Even his shoulders were shaking, indicating just how badly he was holding in his laughter.

“However—”

“What displeases you about this? I even asked the judicial vice-minister himself to write up this contract for you.”

“But—”

“Enough. Viscount Carnel’s signature is already on the document.” The royal envoy stared down the very confused and flabbergasted baron, almost as if wordlessly ordering him to stop complaining and sign the blasted document already.

After a long, pained silence, the baron said, “I…am truly sorry. This is all very sudden. May I respond after having an audience with His Majesty?”

“What? You are refusing to sign the contract that I asked the judicial vice-minister to draft? So, you’re a big shot now, are you, baron?”

“O-Of course not, my lord. Just a brief audience would do. All I wish is for a quick confirmation with His Majesty in person.”

“So you doubt me! Being able to mine mithril has made you brazen and impudent. *Enough*!”

The envoy shot to his feet and headed for the door in a hurry. Seeing Viscount Carnel hurry after him as an attendant would, Sebas also rushed forward to escort them out, but the envoy shouted loudly, “No need!” and furiously slammed the door.

After the dramatic exit, Baron Granvelle cast the parchment onto the grand table. “I refuse to believe in the validity of such a ridiculous contract. Sebas, I must pay the royal palace a visit with haste. Zenof is returning two days from now, yes?”

“Yes, Master. He has gone out on an expedition to the White Dragon Mountains, so he should be returning to town in two days.”

It was as if the clock was now leaping forward after being frozen. The baron barked out questions, taking stock of the situation. As soon as the knight captain returned to Granvelle City, the baron would be taking him along when he headed to the royal capital via magic ship. With this, all the members of the baron’s family and servants were dismissed.

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Several hours later, Allen was busy polishing silverware. During this time in the day, he did not have any particular duties to fulfill, so he normally went around lending a hand to other servants who needed help. At times, he would help cook, tend the garden, do the laundry, and so on and so forth. He was, in short, a jack-of-all-trades. And today, he just happened to be taking a cloth to the silverware used by the baron’s immediate family.

But still, “shared management”? That’s a nice name to put on what’s definitely going to be trouble.

The contract from earlier was still on his mind. “Shared management.” “Peaceful resolution.” “Equal distribution.” With so many empty platitudes that sounded so morally upright, Allen worried how the baron would be able to turn down this “proposal.” If he did so, he could end up being accused of trying to monopolize the mithril market. Allen did not have the faintest idea what the baron could do even if he went to the capital.

Suddenly, a scream rang out from the floor above, jolting Allen from his thoughts.

CRAAAAASH!

“AAAAAAAHHHHHHH!”

The sound of glass smashing was immediately followed by the sounds of struggle coming from the third floor. Allen hurriedly placed the silverware down and dashed up the stairs from the first floor. Everything was so sudden that he had no clue what was going on. It was not Cecil who had screamed, meaning it was likely one of the maidservants. Soon, Sebas and other servants came into view. Allen rushed past, taking care not to bump into anyone.

When he came out the other side of the crowd, the first thing that he saw was a quivering maidservant standing frozen in the hallway and a gentleman-in-waiting crumpled on the floor, the angle of his body indicating that he had been sent flying out of Cecil’s room. There was a crater in the wall where he had presumably crashed against it. He was on the verge of death, bleeding profusely from his stomach.

Seriously?! The assailants came in through the window!

Allen stepped past the frozen maidservant and rushed into Cecil’s room, finding her window gone along with a large portion of the wall. Clearly, the assailants had forcibly blasted their way in. There were three of them, all wearing leather armor for ease of movement. At first, Allen thought they were adventurers, but then gathered from their vibe that they were more likely hoodlums or robbers. Whatever they were, they sure weren’t knights.

One of the men was carrying Cecil tucked under his armpit. As soon as he saw this, Allen knew what he needed to do. He grabbed his mithril sword from Storage and rushed at the man. But one of the other intruders, this one big and muscular, blocked the thrust with his greatsword.

“What the hell’s with this damn brat?!”

Allen continued unleashing a barrage of attacks, but the man managed to parry them all, swearing at him the entire time.

Shit! What’s with this guy?! He’s really strong! I need to change out my cards! Oh, and...

After the first two clashes, Allen could already tell that his opponent was no pushover. He carefully observed the other two as well, worried that they were equally as skilled.

Currently, thirty of Allen’s fifty holders were occupied with Fish D cards. While continuing the sword fight, he fetched a Crop of Magic from Storage and used it to restore his MP, as he had converted everything he had into Skill XP earlier on. After this, he sent away his grimoire and briefly turned around to call it back out directly over the gentleman-in-waiting, page down. A Leaf of Life fell out, fluttering until it landed on the man’s body.

Once he had confirmed with his eyes that the servant was fully healed, Allen whirled around once more. This opponent was far too powerful for Allen to keep his back turned for too long. While he maintained his onslaught, the grimoire floating in midair flipped its pages furiously as cards were Deleted and Created at a blistering rate. Allen felt power welling up inside as his stats climbed higher and higher.

“Hurry up and kill the brat already, Helgei!”

“I know, I know. Die already!” The man apparently did not expect to struggle so much against a child who appeared to be about ten years old. He grew increasingly frustrated as time dragged on.

Upon understanding the situation, Sebas had started shouting down the hallway, “Intruders! Intruder alert! All gentlemen, take up weapons! Someone, call the knights!” At the same time, the baron was also barking out orders, and all the gentleman-in-waiting who had not already rushed for their weapons after the maidservant’s scream did so now. All of them pounded down the hallway, fast approaching Cecil’s room.

“There are knights gathering in the garden! Helgei, that’s enough. We got the target. Time to clear out.”

“You’re not getting away!”

The assailants seemed to have given up on defeating Allen, but Allen kept attacking in a furious bid to save Cecil from their clutches. That moment, however, the assailant armed with a short sword took something out from a pouch on his waist and threw it hard against the ground. Smoke exploded throughout the destroyed room.

Poison?!

Allen tried to hold his breath, but his reaction had been a beat too late, and he managed to get a small whiff. His consciousness faded to black, and he collapsed in place.

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Where…am I? I…fainted? How long was I out?

When Allen woke up, he first tried to remember what had happened.

Did the assailants kidnap me together with Cecil? Shit, that smoke probably paralyzed me or put me to sleep. I didn’t have any precautions in place against status debuffs. Hm? I’m tied up?

Upon regaining full control of his faculties, Allen gleaned that he had been abducted. Just in case his kidnappers were watching him, he kept his eyes closed and pretended that he was still unconscious as he checked his body. Thankfully, he had no injuries or broken bones, but he did realize he could not move his arms and legs. Ropes dug into his skin, and his mouth was biting down on a gag. He had been thoroughly trussed up, much like a caterpillar.

Is there anyone nearby?

Allen concentrated his senses and picked up on several presences. Perhaps the kidnappers were still close by.

I need to confirm Cecil’s condition. Let’s see what we can do.

It was still a mystery whether Cecil was unharmed or not. However, if these men had planned on killing her, then they would have done so back at the mansion. Allen himself being kidnapped meant chances were that she had been as well. Checking up on her took priority.

Robbers, you done fucked up. No, I should really call this a stroke of luck instead. I would’ve been powerless if they had blindfolded me too.

Although Allen could neither move his limbs nor speak, there was no pressure around his eyes, meaning that he could open his eyes to examine his surroundings.

Summoners had one huge weakness: their eyes. They had to visually specify the spawn location whenever calling out Summons. This was why it was impossible to Summon on the other side of obstacles. Naturally, it was also impossible to do so with their eyes closed. So Allen cracked his eyes just the slightest, barely enough that they still appeared closed.

What is this place? A storage room?

Several large wooden crates first came into sight. This appeared to be a rather sizable storeroom. Allen promptly Summoned out a Bird G on top of some boxes and Shared with it. The first order he gave the parrot was to not flap its wings.

So far so good. It might raise suspicions if I get too many out, so just one more for a second perspective.

The eyes of the two Bird Gs transmitted a group of men lounging around in seats. These were indeed the same three who had assaulted the mansion. Cecil quietly lay on the ground a slight distance behind Allen.

Found her. Looks like she's okay.

Through Bird G, Allen confirmed that Cecil was also bound and gagged. Her restraints proved that she should still be alive.

"What the hell?!"

Shit, they spotted me!

The pit of Allen's stomach plummeted as he thought the robbers had figured out he had regained consciousness and was surveilling them. Through Bird G, he watched as a fourth man whom he did not recognize walked in. He had not been with the group that attacked the mansion. Appearing to be slightly over forty, with gaunt cheeks and belligerent eyes, the newcomer wore a similar outfit to the others but was surrounded by a markedly different air. He seemed like someone deeply involved with the criminal underworld.

One of the men in chairs sat up and said, "Dagrah, sir!"

"The hell's the meaning of this? We were supposed to nab one brat, so why're there two? This one looks like a servant or something."

Oh, they didn't see my Summons.

"Y-Yessir. He seemed to be really good with the sword despite being a kid, so I thought we could sell him as a slave for some pocket ch—OOF!"

Before the man could finish speaking, the fourth man had driven a fist into his side. The speaker was wearing leather armor, but it did nothing to soften the force of the blow.

"Listen closely, you pieces of shit. Don't do anything unnecessary. You heard it, right? *I'm* the leader for this mission, which means you do what *I* say. The next time you decide to get 'creative,' I will fucking *end* your pathetic lives. Capisce?!"

“Y-Yessir. Sorry, sir…” the man said through gritted teeth, clutching his side and propping himself up on the ground with both elbows.

After casting a glance over at the other two men who were acting as if nothing had happened, the gaunt man left the room. Apparently he had dropped by to confirm how the kidnapping had gone.

“You okay there, Marcus?”

Once Dagrah was gone, the two others approached the man who had gotten punched.

“Ugh, yeah, I’m fine. Why the boss hired a hit man like that is beyond me. He’s such a massive asshole,” Marcus spat angrily.

“I was told he’s insurance in case Zenof shows up.”

“You serious?”

Okay, I need to figure out where we are.

Allen attempted to glean what information he could from the kidnappers through his Shared Bird Gs. It seemed like this was a storeroom in town, but there was no way to see outside as there were no windows. Allen wanted to know where they were so he could figure out how he would escape with Cecil after getting away from their captors.

“You sure you okay, man?” Helgei asked. “You look like you’re in pain.”

“I’m good,” Marcus replied, despite still holding his side and wincing. “Shit, that bastard seriously pisses me off. He didn’t break a rib, did he? Seriously, why the hell is *he* the leader?”

Allen continued eavesdropping on the men’s conversation while pretending he was still asleep.

“Not much we can do about it. Direct orders from the boss.”

“He’s all full of himself just cuz he survived a battlefield or two, Zenof countermeasure or not. Did you know? I heard he ran with his tail between his legs after just one year on the front lines. So why’s he strutting about like he owns the goddamn place?”

“D-Dude, leave it at that. Someone told me Umbra said that to his face and got his head chopped off right then and there.”

“For real?! No wonder I haven’t seen Umbra around lately.”

“Dead serious. Still, Zenof was supposed to have protected some fortress for a decade, right? Can Dagrah really beat him in a fight?”

“Probably? I mean, he may have protected the place for a decade, but did you hear what happened to it afterward?”

“Why do you know so much about that battle? All right, I’ll bite. What happened to it?”

“After ten years, the place got attacked and fell—” Helgei snapped his fingers, “—just like that. Everyone inside got massacred. Those bastards aren’t human. No idea how Zenof got away, but he sure is shameless being a high-and-mighty knight captain after all that.”

“Damn, man. Having a sword-using Talent is good and all, but it sure ain’t worth dying for.”

“That’s why a year, ten years, it makes no difference. Only idiots go to the battlefield.”

Battlefield? But Mr. Rickel was insistent the kingdom isn’t at war. So there really is a war going on.

The discrepancy between what Rickel had said and what these abductors were saying did pique Allen’s interest, but his highest priority at the moment was getting out of his current situation. He continued eavesdropping, hoping to gather more information.

An hour passed. Unfortunately, the men did not talk about anything particularly useful. Even now, they were having a blast discussing how they would use the money from selling Allen to go gambling.

Mm, doesn’t look like I’ll get much more info. I still have no idea where we are. Let’s move on to taking stock of what I’ve got at my disposal and figure out how to secure an escape route.

Allen’s mithril sword was probably still back in the mansion where he had dropped it when he lost consciousness in the middle of fighting the kidnappers. All he had with him currently was the short sword that Dogora had given him and the iron balls. Even if he were to start fighting, getting away with Cecil would still be top priority.

One of the men said he had business to take care of and stood up.

Oh? Is he leaving? Let’s go with him.

Under Allen’s instruction, one of the Bird Gs that had been hiding behind a wooden box flew out. The two men remaining in their seats immediately noticed the bird flapping its wings, but it ignored their stares and darted straight through the open door.

Did that seem suspicious? Oh well, doesn’t matter. It’s a fair price for figuring out where we are.

“Huh? What’s a bird doing in a place like this?”

“Some rich asshole probably brought their pet bird onboard or something. Must be nice to be them.”

“You mean, *sucks* to be them! Their damn bird just got away. Hah!”

Wait, “onboard”? We’re on a ship?

Allen kept an eye on the field of vision from the Bird G that flew out while continuing to eavesdrop on the kidnappers. He had thought this was a storeroom somewhere in town and had expected the door to lead outside. Instead, it turned out to be a long hallway with a ceiling about two meters high.

The bird shot past the occupied kidnapper and found a staircase at the end of the hallway. The Summon immediately flew up it.

Does this lead to a higher floor? The storeroom itself was rather spacious. If this really is a ship, it must be huge.

The staircase opened up to another long passageway. Bird G proceeded down its length and quickly found a door on its right. It had a round glass window that could be peered out of.

Oh? Does this door lead outside?

It was all dark on the other side of the window. Allen tried to look through it from various angles, but he still could not see anything.

Why's it all black? Wait, those are stars...and that's the night sky! Which means I am looking outside, it's just nighttime now. But that's strange: where's the ocean?

When Allen squinted, he realized he was looking at a starry sky. The kidnappers had attacked before twilight, which meant several hours had passed by now. However, if this was a ship, then the light from the stars should be reflecting off the surface of the water they were sailing over. Yet, there were no such reflections.

What?! The room's shaking!

As Allen was occupied with analyzing what he was seeing through Bird G's eyes, the room he was in jerked violently all of a sudden.

"C'mon, least they can do is fly this piece of junk properly."

"I second that. Screw this turbulence shit or whatever it's called."

Just as the men were complaining among themselves, an announcement similar to what Allen had heard in his previous life rang out.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we apologize for the turbulence our magic ship, the Bahona, is currently experiencing. This won't affect our steering ability, but be aware that the sudden jerking might cause you to lose your footing and fall over. We recommend that you remain seated."

What?! So we're on a magic ship right now?!

As it turned out, Allen and Cecil had already left Granvelle City and had been brought on board a magic ship that was currently making its way through the night sky.

What should I do? There's no place to run if we're up in the air on a magic ship. I guess I really do have to take out our captors. Actually, no, let's look around the ship a bit more first. Intel first, then fight.

The Bird G turned away from the window to explore the interior of the ship. Allen realized that he and Cecil were located in the belly of the vessel where the passengers' luggage was stored.

Interesting how they have a door for going outside that's accessible even when the magic ship is flying. I mean, it is true that this thing is flying a lot slower than airplanes.

The fact that he could see the night sky through the door from earlier meant it led outside. Perhaps it was a maintenance door for checking on the outer wall of the vessel. Either way, unlike planes in his previous life, the door was operable even during flight. Opening it and jumping outside was still suicide, though.

At the other end of the corridor with the door was another flight of stairs that headed up. It led to a floor lined with doors at regular intervals in a design similar to a business hotel. As Bird G continued down the corridor, it picked up lively sounds up ahead. It eventually burst into what looked like an onboard restaurant.

Damn, there're so many people! So food is served on magic ships. Pretty funny how this is how I get to experience my first time riding one.

Multiple passengers noticed the bird and pointed, but Allen ignored them and continued surveying the place. As Bird G continued deeper in, there was a marked shift in the clientele. Judging by the formal outfits of the passengers here, this was a separate area for the rich. Elegant noblewomen lounged on comfortable-looking sofas, chatting with each other over glasses of wine.

Just as Allen was about to conclude that there was no further information to glean, he spotted two men seated at the far end through Bird G's eyes.

That's Viscount Carnel and the royal envoy!

The two men were also lounging on comfortable sofas and enjoying an expensive vintage. They appeared to be tipsy, so Allen had Bird G surreptitiously approach and duck behind the shade of a nearby lamp to eavesdrop on their conversation. The viscount seemed to have caught sight of the parrot for a split second, making Allen's heart skip a beat, but the man looked away almost immediately, apparently thinking nothing more of it. Thanks to this, Allen could now hear everything the two men were saying.

"Seriously, how can His Majesty support someone from the Academy Faction for judicial minister?" the royal envoy complained, clearly already quite drunk.

"It's a travesty, that's what it is," Viscount Carnel agreed.

Huh? What's the "Academy Faction"?

"That seat is supposed to be ours. We must help the vice-minister gain the position no matter what it takes."

Because Allen had dropped in halfway through the conversation, he had no idea what the two men were talking about. According to what he gathered by listening carefully, the position of judicial minister in the government would become vacant this year. The next person who would fill the seat was a noble belonging to a party named the Academy Faction, but these two men wished to change that arrangement as a political maneuver.

The viscount took a swig of wine and sighed with satisfaction. "The look on Lord Granvelle's face makes any wine taste better."

"He was getting full of himself after his mines started back up, wasn't he? Let's just say that keeping the lesser nobles in line is also part of my duties as a royal envoy."

"Thank you very much for pulling strings and getting the vice-minister to help with the contract."

"Oh, don't mention it. I only did what was natural, considering our relationship. But still, that white dragon couldn't have picked a more inconvenient time to move. We're already spending enough as is, trying to change the appointment for judicial minister."

The viscount bowed obsequiously. “I’m truly sorry for burdening you with this matter at such a time.”

I see, so it was Viscount Carnel who had planned the whole scheme with the contract suggesting joint management over the White Dragon Mountains. And this is probably how his family’s been using their mithril money for the past hundred years or so—throwing it around “forging relationships” with other nobles and government officials to do whatever they please.

“You are sure that you have things under control, yes?” the envoy asked. “The palace is far from being entirely on our side. Without the contract, the baron is able to make as much of a fuss he wants and His Majesty would be unable to intervene. Things could get very messy. Make sure you get the baron to sign that contract, no matter what.”

“Of course, my lord. That’s why I kidnapped his precious daughter. Oh, how he dotes on her. So, I made sure to leave him a letter to ensure he doesn’t do anything stupid.”

So this is why the envoy’s attitude suddenly turned sour when the baron said he would be visiting the palace.

“As long as you get him to sign, nothing else matters.”

“If he doesn’t, we can simply send him one of his daughter’s arms!”

“And when Zenof comes attacking, your hit man will kill him?”

“That is the plan, yes. Though I do hope Zenof doesn’t end up winning and going on a rampage in my realm.”

“You could spin that to your advantage too, couldn’t you? If a knight captain makes a scene in another realm, then his lord can be convicted and forced to take responsibility. After all, rioting is a serious crime. If Zenof does end up going off the handle, perhaps you should thank him instead!”

“Brilliant idea, my lord!”

“Of course, you know why I’ve gone to all this trouble for you, right?”

“Absolutely, my lord. As promised, a portion of the mining rights is yours.”

Hmm, so Viscount Carnel’s got the upper hand with his political influence, and the law’s on his side since there’s no way to prove he’s behind Cecil’s kidnapping. The baron’s hands are tied as long as she’s held hostage. And the reason for this attack and kidnapping is mithril mining rights. I guess that just goes to show how much money there is in mithril.

The conversation he had just overheard shed significant light on a lot of things. Allen was about to slowly consider what action to take next when his thoughts were interrupted.

“Mmmph!”

Oh shit, Cecil’s come to.

“Did you just wake up? Shut it, girlie!”

“MMMMMPH!”

Upon realizing that she was tied up, Cecil protested furiously, her face colored with anger. However, she could not move nor speak due to being bound and gagged. She then noticed Allen close by.

"MMPH! MMNNGH!"

Cut it out! Stop kicking me! How're you even doing that when you're tied up?!

Cecil was clearly under the impression that Allen was still unconscious. She pulled her legs in and extended them sharply multiple times in an effort to wake him up. However, he was determined to show no reaction, as he was pretending to be asleep.

"Shut up already! Your attendant's knocked out cuz we drugged 'im. We'll be arriving in Carnel City soon, so be quiet."

So this magic ship is heading for Carnel City. Makes sense, with Viscount Carnel being onboard. He'll be able to do whatever he wants as soon as we land. I've really gotta do something. ...Okay, seriously, stop it! It hurts! Ow!

Naturally, Carnel City would be filled with Viscount Carnel's men. Escape would be much more difficult once the ship arrived. While Allen was thinking furiously, Cecil continued kicking his rear by flexing like a shrimp.

Marcus grimaced. "Helgei, go shut her up."

"Oh, all right. Hey, stupid brat! Shut the hell up if you don't want me to knock the living daylights out of you!"

"MMMNNNGH!" Cecil continued kicking Allen in desperation. She probably thought he would be able to take care of the situation somehow as soon as he woke up.

Seriously, I need to do something. My card distribution is fine, so...let's do this.

Just in case, Allen checked his Status one final time.

```
Name: Allen
Age: 12
Class: Summoner
Level: 41
HP: 1,040 + 240
MP: 1,620 + 20
Attack: 570 + 200
Endurance: 570 + 635
Agility: 1,065 + 679
Intelligence: 1,630 + 104
Luck: 1,065
```

Skills: Summoning {5}, Creation {5}, Synthesis {5}, Strengthening {5}, Expansion {4}, Storage, Sharing, Deletion, Sword Mastery {3}, Throwing {3}
XP: 37,839,560/50,000,000

Skill LevelsSummoning: 5
Creation: 5
Synthesis: 5
Strengthening: 5

Skill ExperienceCreation: 12,482/10,000,000
Synthesis: 10,265/10,000,000
Strengthening: 8,269,330/10,000,000

Creatable SummonsInsect: D, E, F, G, H
Beast: D, E, F, G, H
Bird: D, E, F, G
Grass: D, E, F
Stone: D, E
Fish: D

HolderInsect: F x 1, E x 1, D x 29
Beast: D x 10
Bird: G x 2, D x 4
Grass:
Stone: D x 2
Fish: D x 1

[redacted]

"Looks like you *really* need a beating."

Despite her fear, Cecil gave Helgei a death glare as he approached. The man pulled his fist back.

Ugh, you guys are really forcing my hand here. Ageha, use Scale Powder!

"What?!" the kidnappers exclaimed in astonishment as a massive, meter-tall swallowtail butterfly appeared out of thin air. It flapped its wings furiously, filling the entire room with yellow powder.

Nice, one of them fell asleep.

The dagger-user collapsed like a toy that had its batteries taken out. Helgei quickly reduced the Summon to light bubbles with a swing of his weapon.

Snap! Snaaap!

In that time, Allen ripped apart his restraints with his brute strength. The ropes that he had been tied up with meant nothing to him given his current Attack stat. Helgei whirled around, his eyes wide with surprise. Before the man could gather himself, a giant bear appeared in front of him.

"Wh-What the fuck is going on?!"

"RROOAARRRR!"

Teddy charged forward and used Crush, but Helgei calmed down just in the nick of time and stepped aside, even slashing the beast as it pounded past. Although that was not enough to finish the bear off, Helgei had proved that he was much faster. None of Beast D's following attacks landed either. Conversely, the bear disappeared into light bubbles after taking three slashes.

"Die, you monster!"

While everyone present was transfixed by the battle, Allen sneaked around to Marcus's side. Beast D had been a diversion; this had been his true aim. He unleashed a blow with all the strength he could muster precisely where the man had just been wounded by Dagrah.

"Augh...you fucking...brat..." Marcus groaned before crashing to the floor headfirst, knocked unconscious by the pain. He lay twitching like a dead frog.

Taking out the weakened one first is just common sense. Now there's only one left.

The sole remaining kidnapper, Helgei, calmly brought his sword up to a middle stance, asking loudly, "Marcus, you okay?"

While taking out his short sword from Dogora, Allen threw an iron ball at Helgei. However, because he had come from the front, the swordsman had no trouble knocking it down.

"You puny little shit!"

Hmm, this is my first time pointing a real sword at a human, but surprisingly, I don't feel any hesitation at all. Oh wait, no, I'd done the same when these guys attacked the mansion. A bit late to be having such thoughts, I guess.

"Does this puny little shit scare you?" Allen asked, provoking the man.

"That's it. You're dead!" Helgei roared, unleashing a swing.

Brons, now! Hold him down!

Two Stone Ds materialized abruptly before and behind Helgei, sandwiching him before promptly activating Defend.

"What the hell is this?!"

So far, so good. He needed to attack Teddy three times to kill it, so this should be enough to make him skip a few turns, so to speak.

Even while finishing Marcus off, Allen had been monitoring the fight between Helgei and Beast D through the eyes of the Bird G that he was still Shared with. He determined that it would take Helgei a while to take care of Stone Ds with their Ability activated.

Now that he had some breathing room, Allen Summoned a Fish D and had it use Splash.

Next, Suckers, sap his strength! Spidey, use Spider Silk!

Two Insect Gs attached themselves to the trapped man as an Insect D started spewing him with sticky threads, further restraining his movements.

Nice, Insect G's Ability is affecting him. So the debuffs from Insect Summons do affect humans too. And just now, Cecil didn't glow when Fish D cast its buff. Is she not recognized as my ally because she's not actually fighting?

Allen found a lot to analyze about his first-ever battle with a human enemy.

The hit man's around too, so I should quickly finish this person off.

Neither Fish D's buff nor Insect E's debuff had affected Cecil. Further testing was needed to figure out the exact conditions for determining allies or enemies, but this was hardly the time for it. Including the currently absent Dagrah, there were a total of four people who meant Cecil and Allen harm. As such, finishing off the third enemy, Helgei, was of the utmost urgency.

Allen brought his sword down as hard as he could on the shoulder of the man pressed between the two Stone Ds.

"RAH! This goddamn brat!"

He's so tough—or maybe I'm just too weak. And this sword isn't good enough for fights of this level. Should I raise my Attack and try to push through? On second thought, it probably suits me better to use Agility to whittle him down with the number of attacks.

Helgei's class was likely Swordsman or some other related variation. Due to this, his Endurance was so high that Allen could not deal any significant damage to him even with 750 Attack. Even if he managed to stab the man with his sword, it would not be lethal. In this world, a person's physical parameters were quantified, so when someone with high Endurance was stabbed, a mysterious force prevented them from dying. It was Allen's first time experiencing this strange phenomenon.

Even so, Allen was absolutely overwhelming Helgei. With his Agility-based build, he was raining attacks on the man who was not only held in place by the Stone Ds, but was also too tall to properly strike down where Allen was. Consequently, Allen was now basically hacking away at the man one-sidedly.

"Guh!"

As a finishing move, Allen kicked the man in the stomach, sending him slamming against the wall of the storeroom. Helgei's head drooped as he finally lost consciousness. At that exact moment, an announcement came over the speakers.

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for riding with us. Our magic ship, the Bahona, will be arriving in Carnel City shortly. We have begun our descent, so kindly please remain in your seats."

I finally managed to take him out, but I'm running out of time. Gotta free Cecil right now.

Allen could physically feel the magic ship's descent as it shook even harder than before. Once it docked, the two children would have nowhere left to run. He hurried over to Cecil.

"Lady Cecil, I will untie you now."

"Mmmh..." Cecil, who had seen the fight from start to finish, was in a stunned daze. Allen pretended not to notice as he proceeded to tear her bindings apart.

"Come on now, what the fuck happened here? How'd a single brat get the jump on all of them? These babysitters the client hired sure are weak!"

Suddenly, Dagrah, the hit man hired by Viscount Carnel, walked in. He was startled at the large beasts all around, then eyed them warily. Without missing a beat, Allen immediately let go of Cecil's ropes and turned around while calling out a new Stone D.

"OOF!"

"MMMMPH!"

Before Allen had managed to do his Summoning, however, he already found himself slammed against the wall. He had been kicked in his side so hard that several of his ribs broke.

Shit! This guy's so fast! Does he have a scouting build? It looked like he straight-up disappeared for a split second.

Thanks to the vision provided by the Bird G remaining in the storeroom, Allen had known exactly where Dagrah had been even while he was facing Cecil. However, he could not perform Summoning through the eyes of a Shared Summon, so he still needed to turn around to look in person. It turned out that tiny window of time was more than enough for the hit man to close the distance. Within that split second, Allen had been kicked against the wall so fast even he himself had disappeared from Bird G's vision for a moment.

"What's with that look? Never got hit with a skill before? Those guys were seriously trash, getting taken out by a brat like this."

Continuing to maintain a wary distance from the Summons, Dagrah drew the rapier from his waist and slowly approached Allen.

So that was a skill just now? No, no, I don't have time to analyze it right now. Fighting here is not an option. That leaves me only one choice.

Allen understood from that one blow that this opponent was far too strong for him to fight. He used a Leaf of Life to heal himself, then...

"Dagrah, what's taking you so damn long?!"

"Wha—?! Your Lordship, why are you here?!"

Dagrah whirled toward the corner of the storeroom where Viscount Carnel's voice had just sounded from. Of course, this was due to Bird G using its Ability, Voice Mimic, to speak using the viscount's voice. The instant Dagrah was caught off guard, Insect D wrapped him up with Spider

Silk. Allen threw his short sword into Storage, dashed over to grab Cecil, then darted past Dagrah and through the open door.

"ARGH!" the man groaned in annoyance. "What the fuck is this?!"

Looks like Spider Silk isn't slowing him all that much. Brons, seal the passage behind us.

Allen dashed down the corridor outside, but it took almost no time for Dagrah to break through the silky threads and give chase. While running, Allen turned around for a split second to Summon two Stone Ds. As this corridor was only about two meters high and less than three meters across, the bronze statues made for very effective obstacles. From the other side, the Insect Gs and other Rank D Summons that had remained out all this time surged toward the man as one unit, doing their best to slow him down.

During that time, Allen tore up the stairs at his top speed.

One Bron just got done in. I'm running out of time. Should I make my way to where the other passengers are? No, we'd still get caught eventually. That leaves...

Currently, Allen and Cecil were in the passage with the door that led outside that Allen had found while scouting earlier. He could see the ground gradually drawing near through the glass window. Magic tools similar to searchlights illuminated the landing pad so that the vessel would not crash; this made it easy for Allen to accurately gauge exactly how high up they still were.

He gently set Cecil down, then wrestled the door open. A gale roared up, but he ignored it and stuck his head through the doorframe to look down—there were still more than a hundred meters to the ground.

"Lady Cecil, I'm sorry. We'll be jumping down, but please don't worry."

"MMMGH?!"

Cecil seemed to be saying something, but it only came out as meaningless grunts.

Gotta change up my cards to raise my Endurance. Bron would be able to raise my HP too, but I don't have enough time.

The Beast D cards in the card holders were quickly replaced with Insect Ds for their Endurance buff. Stone cards required multiple steps of Synthesizing, so Allen had to settle for Insect for now.

"It's fine, milady. I *should* have enough Endurance. Stat points don't lie!" Honestly, at this point, even Allen was not sure what he was saying.

"MMMMMMNNPH!"

Cecil used every single part of her body to express her resistance. However, even though she was moving even more violently than she had in the storeroom, Allen paid her no mind. He fetched his mantle from Storage and wrapped it around her just in case, then hugged her close so as to not drop her.

"So then, here goes! Allen, taking off!"

As Cecil desperately pleaded with him not to, tears spilling from her eyes, Allen stepped out from the magic ship into the beautiful starry night sky.

Chapter 13: Flight

Allen leaped out of the magic ship with Cecil in his arms. They were more than a hundred meters above ground, but he was almost certain that he would be fine with his current stats thanks to his level and card buffs.

Several seconds later, he slammed into the ground with tremendous force, feet first. The impact caused the beautifully laid stone pavement to shatter into a thousand pieces.

FUUUUCK, that hurt!

The bones in both of Allen's legs snapped, unable to bear the shock of the landing. However, he immediately used a Leaf of Life to restore himself to full health the next instant.

He checked to see if Cecil had gotten hurt during the fall. To his relief, aside from a few stone fragments that had hit the mantle she was wrapped in, she was entirely fine.

All right. As expected, we managed to escape without Cecil getting hurt, although I did end up using a Leaf of Life. Honestly, the shock didn't even travel up to my arms. That Endurance stat is really showing its worth here.

Allen's understanding of Endurance as a stat was that it served as a shock absorber for all physical damage to his body. From what he observed in himself every day, having higher Endurance did not translate to having more muscles. Rather than his body getting bulky or his skin becoming as tough as metal, it was as if there was a protective membrane around him that helped alleviate incoming damage proportionate to the stat. This time, Allen had just fallen more than a hundred meters with his and Cecil's weight combined. It was not surprising that he had taken damage—his legs did shatter—but thanks to the effect of the Endurance stat, the shock from the impact had been suppressed, leaving Cecil unaffected.

"Lady Cecil, I will free you from your restraints now."

Just in case, Allen had used a Leaf of Life on Cecil as well right after the fall. Even so, he still carefully checked to make sure she was fine, then used his short sword to slice through all her ropes.

"Allen! How could you just—!"

The moment Cecil was freed, every inch of her body expressed her indignation toward Allen's unbelievable actions. However, Allen had no time to hear her out. He wrapped his mantle around her shoulders once again.

"I'm truly sorry, milady. The magic ship will be landing soon."

This should do. It'll provide some protection just in case any pursuers shoot arrows at us.

"Allen, listen to me! Where'd you take this cape out from?! And what was that just n—"

"Lady Cecil!"

"Wh-What?"

“Our top priority at the moment is to take you somewhere safe. Therefore, we will leave this place immediately. Please climb onto my back so I can carry you.”

Allen’s tone was firm and brooked no protest. It would be hard to run with Cecil in a princess carry, so he was planning on giving her a piggyback ride instead. The magic ship seemed about to land at any moment. Despite being disgruntled with the current situation, Cecil still obediently did as Allen requested.

“Wha— You’re going too fast!” Cecil cried as Allen started sprinting faster than a horse.

“Please hang on tight! Take care not to bite your tongue!”

We’ve got no time left. Horos, guide us to where we need to go!

Four owls appeared in midair, then dispersed to provide Allen with a comprehensive view of how Carnel City was laid out. He quickly worked out the shortest route to a city gate, then headed in that direction as fast as he could.

Nice, Dagrah went to report what happened to the viscount. Yes, please give us more time to get a head start.

All this time, Allen had been using the Bird G left inside the magic ship to continue keeping an eye on the situation onboard. He watched as Dagrah went to find one of Viscount Carnel’s men and explained how Allen and Cecil had escaped through a lower maintenance door of the ship. The viscount asked in an agitated voice, “They’re alive, right?! Tell me they’re alive!” However, Dagrah could only shake his head and say that there was no way to confirm until they were back on ground. He was currently in the middle of explaining that, considering the altitude, there was definitely a chance that both children had died.

While on the fly, Allen quickly changed his card distribution.

- `Insect D: 44`
- `Bird G: 2`
- `Bird D: 4`

The kidnappers seem really flustered. After all, this world has never even heard of a Tamer class before. My Summons were probably a huge shock.

In the games that Allen had played in his previous life, there had been a class that functioned similarly to Summoner: Tamer. The main difference between the two was what kind of creatures they each used to do their bidding, with Tamers using monsters they encountered and tamed and Summoners calling forth beings not normally found in the wild.

As he ran, Allen recalled when he had broached the topic with Raven. The adventurer had said emphatically, “There’s no way anyone can tame a monster!” Based on that, Allen had concluded that this world did not have Taming as a class—the idea had never even occurred to the inhabitants.

This explained why the kidnappers had been so bewildered upon seeing Allen's Summons. If this had been a world where everyone understood the concept of Tamers, their reactions would have been very different.

The gates of Carnel City were still open. When Allen produced the crest of House Granvelle, the guards let them through without giving them trouble, being good enough at their job to recognize the crest from a neighboring realm. Allen was aware that, as a boy in a servant's uniform carrying a girl on his back, he looked quite suspicious. However, it apparently was not enough of a reason for them to detain him.

All right, we're out. The mountain range is that direction, right?

The stars shone brightly, illuminating Allen's way as he took off at a run. The first order of business was to distance themselves from Carnel City. Once they got their bearings, then they would head back to Granvelle City.

It's a relief we managed to get out of the city. Now we'll have to find the White Dragon Mountains and take a detour around the north of the range. I wonder how many days it's gonna take us...

After running for a while longer, Allen finally stopped to allow Cecil some rest. She stared as he openly took out an illumination magic tool, water, and foodstuffs from Storage.

A little time into their rest, however, the Bird D that Allen had instructed to remain on standby above the magic ship landing pad caught sight of a troubling development. A group of people had gathered around the conspicuous crater in the pavement where he and Cecil had landed earlier.

Looks like Viscount Carnel's giving out instructions...and Dagrah's there too. I guess without our bodies being there, it's pretty obvious that we survived.

The viscount was gesticulating furiously at the men grouped around him. As Allen continued keeping an eye on the situation through Bird D so as to glean any information he could about any prospective pursuers, he noticed Dagrah cutting the viscount off and making some sort of argument. The Summon was too high in the sky to hear what was actually being said. However, just as Allen was focusing his attention on the Shared feed, Dagrah's body blurred for a split second, followed by an aura bursting out from it. The next instant, he took off in a flash.

Damn, he's fast! I knew it; he must have a class similar to a Scout. His Agility stat has to be at least Rank A, if not S.

As Allen continued watching, Dagrah made a beeline for the gate that Allen had left from.

Hm? He's heading out of the city?

After passing through the gate, the hit man continued running.

Wait, don't tell me he's...?

Allen finally realized that Dagrah was running in a straight line right toward Cecil's and his current location.

Shit! Oh, shit! How is he...? He's gotta be using a skill.

Judging by how quickly Dagrah was closing the distance, it was clear that he could tell where Allen was, perhaps thanks to the help of a tracking ability tied to his class.

“Lady Cecil, I’m very sorry. There are already pursuers on our tail, so we must resume moving immediately.”

“Huh? O-Okay.”

Dagrah was fast, true, but after rearranging his cards just now, Allen now had more than 2,000 Agility. Despite being handicapped by shouldering Cecil, he should be able to stay ahead for quite a while longer. And so the game of tag began.

Sure enough, Allen stayed ahead, but he never managed to actually throw the man off his trail. He tried various tricks, such as veering in a completely different direction and purposely crossing a river without using the bridge, but nothing seemed to faze the hit man. Even though he was lagging behind quite significantly, Dagrah still managed to stick closely to Allen’s trail.

The Scout class sure is capa— Oh look, a town!

The Bird D that was scouting ahead had just spotted a sizable town. Its gates appeared to be closed, but Allen still veered toward it. Soon enough, they got close enough to where even Cecil noticed the watch fires that dotted the town wall, giving it away.

“Are we going into that town?”

“Yes, milady.”

“But the gate looks closed.”

“It does indeed. I’ll think of something, so please play along.”

Here goes my attempt to lose Dagrah using the town.

“You there! Stop!”

When Allen approached the gate, the guard on lookout barked at him. A boy in a servant’s uniform carrying a young girl on his back dashing toward the town at an incredible speed this late at night naturally cut a very suspicious figure. Not only did the guard look wary, he even brought his spear up.

However, Allen, who was making a show of panting heavily, purposely ignored the man to talk to Cecil in a reassuring tone. “Phew, what a relief. We’ve finally reached a town, milady. Please hold on just a little longer.”

“O-Okay…”

Only then did Allen turn back to the guard. “Mr. Guard, I’m really sorry, but can you let us into the town, please?”

“Y-You know I can’t. We closed this gate ages ago. There’s no way I can let you in. Besides, you seem awfully suspicious, arriving at this time of night.”

“But we aren’t suspicious at all, Mr. Guard.” Allen produced his crest.

“So you’re from House Granvelle…” The man faltered slightly. However, the fact still remained that someone from the family of the baron of the

neighboring realm arriving this late at night made very little sense. “Wh-Why are you even out this late?”

“Unfortunately, our carriage broke down a distance away. It’s in such bad shape that it won’t be able to move anymore without attention. However, milady insisted that she could not bear to sleep outside.”

Allen lied as naturally as he breathed. He made a show to convey how troubled he felt dealing with a broken-down carriage and a demanding mistress. Cecil was dumbfounded at suddenly having all the fault shoved onto her, forgetting to back up Allen’s claim.

“So, that’s what happened?” The guard crossed his arms and groaned. “Even so…”

Oh? Looks like I only need one more push. Dagrah is almost upon us, so I can’t afford to spend any more time here.

“I’m aware that I’m asking for a lot, Mr. Guard. However, would this be enough to convince you to overlook this?”

Allen surreptitiously pressed something into the man’s hand. The guard started, then examined it closely; gold glinted in the light of the watch fires.

“W-Well, I can see that you’re clearly in need of a break. Just saying, though, the inns are all closed by now.”

“I’ll figure something out,” Allen replied, insinuating that he would use money to “convince” an innkeeper to let them stay. The guard shook his head wryly while opening the small door to the side of the gate.

After entering the town, however, Allen immediately turned off the main street, heading deeper and deeper down the alleyways in an irregular, zigzagging path.

“Aren’t we staying at an inn, Allen?”

“We are not, milady.”

There were multiple lodgings along the main street, but Allen had ignored them all. Just as Cecil asked him where they were going, the Bird D monitoring the town gate spotted Dagrah.

Ugh. Just as I’d feared, he does own some form of permit.

After showing the gate guard something, Dagrah also entered the town through the side door at the gate. Then the man took off again at a run.

All right, that confirms it: his skill enables him to follow my footsteps. What a relief that it’s not a mapping skill.

Allen had just finished analyzing Dagrah’s tracking skill based on everything he had noticed during the past few hours. Back when he was Kenichi, he had experienced playing a large variety of classes in his games. Most of the time, he chose classes that focused on dealing damage, such as warrior and mage. He was all about those big DPS numbers using powerful weapons or spells, respectively. In short, he was a bit of a meathead player. Consequently, he was not all that familiar with classes that relied on trickery, like Scout. That said, he knew quite a bit about them. And to his knowledge, there were two main kinds of tracking skills.

- Enables the player to see visible tracks left on the ground by the target
- Enables the player to see the target’s coordinates on the in-game map

Allen could now say with certainty that the skill Dagrah was using belonged to the first type. After all, he was precisely following all the detours that Allen had made, including crossing the river where Allen had instead of taking the bridge. Even now, the man was wasting his time weaving through the alleyways. If he had known Allen’s exact coordinates, he would not have gone to such trouble.

All right, time to try losing him.

“Milady, I’m going to be jumping. Please hold on tight.”

“Wha—?!”

With a powerful leap, Allen landed on the roof of the nearby building and took off again, leaping from rooftop to rooftop. Due to constantly chasing Allen’s tracks, Dagrah had his head down most of the time while running. Allen took care not to draw attention to his position up on the rooftops as he drew farther and farther away.

Hell yeah! Finally lost him! My analysis was spot on. You need a hundred years’ more experience to come after me! Mua ha ha!

Through Bird D’s eyes, Allen watched Dagrah freaking out at seeing Allen’s tracks seemingly vanish into thin air. He turned back as if he thought he had made a wrong turn somewhere. It apparently never crossed his mind that Allen would be taking countermeasures against being tracked and therefore never thought to check the rooftops. At the moment, Allen was already standing on top of the town’s wall.

“Aren’t you going to fight him, Allen?” Cecil asked suddenly. “You’re really strong, though.”

“I’m afraid he’s a bad match for me. I don’t think I would be able to beat him.”

Even if I went all-out without considering the consequences, my chances of victory are probably still below ten percent. My Summons are slow on their feet, and if I tried to set a trap for him and lay in wait, he’d probably just evade it. And even if I managed to land a few blows on him, he probably has HP potions on him. That’s it, we’re leaving town. Bron, come out!

Allen Summoned a Stone D on the ground outside the wall with its shield held aloft horizontally. He then jumped down onto the flat surface, Summoned another one a slight distance away in the same pose, and leaped over. After this, he repeatedly called out Brons and reverted them to card form so he could travel across their shields à la stepping stones. He did this for several kilometers in an effort to travel without leaving any tracks.

I wonder if Dagrah can see the tracks of my Summons the same way he can see mine. No idea, but it does seem like a good idea to do this every once in a while to throw him off the track a little.

As this method proved time-consuming, Allen reverted to running on the ground in spurts, alternating between the two at irregular intervals. In this way, he continued heading toward the northern tip of the White Dragon Mountains, which he had already located with Bird D. Once they passed the border checkpoint, they would be back in Granvelle territory.

A while later, Allen stopped and got to work preparing a camp for Cecil and himself. Unfortunately, the distance to Granvelle City was much farther than he could travel in just a day or two. Multiple Brons materialized to stand in a protective circle around the two children while Allen took out blankets and other camping equipment that he kept in Storage.

"So you *do* have a Talent after all…" Cecil murmured.

"Yes, I do. It's quite convenient too; I can do a lot of things with it."

"Why did you keep quiet about it?"

"Little good comes from parading one's Talent, right?"

"I… Yes, I suppose so…"

"We'll continue running tomorrow. Please rest up for now."

"Aren't you going to sleep too, Allen?"

"I will. Good night, Lady Cecil."

"G-Good night, Allen."

Now then. I hope we can get back within three or four days. I'm not sure I can last any longer than that.

While staring at Cecil's sleeping face, Allen checked in on Dagrah through his Summon. His sleep tonight would be brief and fitful as he continued monitoring the situation.

Several hours later, what he had feared came to pass.

Ugh, he's found the tracks on the roof. He sure knows what he's doing.

As soon as his trick was out of the bag, Allen packed everything away, shouldered the still-groggy Cecil, then took off again. On the other hand, Dagrah soon reached the town wall. He descended but, upon failing to see Allen's tracks yet again, started busily looking around.

Heh heh heh, how's that? No tracks! Wait, what?

Allen was keeping an eye on Dagrah's movements even as he himself was running. However, as soon as he realized the tracks were gone, Dagrah took off in one direction. After running several kilometers, he began running at an angle, alternating between left and right in intervals of several kilometers.

What is he doin— Oh, shit.

By doing so, Dagrah would eventually stumble upon Allen's tracks. And sure enough, he picked up the trail soon enough and resumed the pursuit.

This isn't good. I need to increase the distance where I run without tracks.

Although traveling by Summons did prove effective, Dagrah never failed to eventually discover where Allen had started running normally again. In response, Allen decided to spend more time using his Summons in order to be more thorough with erasing his trail. With Dagrah repeatedly losing and

rediscovering Allen's trail, the distance between the two increased and decreased in a seemingly endless loop.

□□□

On the morning of the second day, Allen successfully managed to reach the northernmost border checkpoint. He was finally back in Granvelle territory.

"What's wrong, Allen? Did something happen?"

"I'm sorry?"

The way Allen had immediately taken off again in a hurry after passing through the checkpoint had aroused Cecil's suspicions.

Ugh, she's caught on. I guess being honest is the best play here.

"I just lost Dagrah."

"What?"

All this time, Allen had been keeping a constant eye on Dagrah through a Summon that he was Sharing with. He explained to Cecil that Dagrah was following them—as well as who he was—and that he had a tracking ability. Of course, this required that he reveal he also had a means of tracking someone.

A while ago, Dagrah had suddenly taken off at an incredible speed and lost the Bird E that had been following him from behind. Now Allen had several Bird Es flying around trying to regain a visual on the man. However, because he was running faster than the birds could fly, it was proving very difficult pinning him down.

So he did have a skill that supercharges his speed after all. I knew it.

Allen recalled when Dagrah had kicked him in the storeroom. The man had been so fast that he seemed to have disappeared for a split second in Allen's eyes. However, whereas Allen had only seen Dagrah use it for the short distance that was the length of the storeroom, the hit man now proved that he could indeed use it for a prolonged period of time to traverse an incredible distance. He had vanished from Bird E's vision in no time at all.

From her position on Allen's back, Cecil suddenly said, completely out of character, "If you leave me behind, you'll be able to get away no problem, right?"

"What are you saying, milady? I would never leave you behind."

"But at this rate…"

Oh right, Cecil is only still twelve years old. It's only natural for her to feel fainthearted in a situation like this.

The back-to-back days of being on the run had apparently gotten to Cecil and left her feeling quite timid and out of her element.

"Don't worry, milady. We *will* safely make it back to Granvelle, *together*. I've got everything under control. I did make a promise, after all."

"What promise?"

"I promised Master Mihai that I would protect you. And I keep my promises."

Surprise flitted across Cecil's face. After a short pause, she mumbled, "Thank you…" and buried her face in Allen's shoulder.

I said the cool lines and all, but I really oughta prepare some insurance. Now that we've crossed the border, it's about time.

Allen sent several Summons flying off into the distance as "insurance" and continued scouting the area using Hawk Eye in order to get a bead on Dagrah as soon as possible.

□ □ □

The third day out of Carnel City started once again with Allen shouldering Cecil and taking off at a run early in the morning. He was hurrying with the aim of reaching Granvelle City within the next day.

At this time, there was a monster eyeing one Bird E from a distance away. The monster had learned that this bird's presence indicated that a certain playmate, whom it once had so much fun with, was close by. Its half-human, half-doglike face with one squashed eye twisted into a sneer of sheer ecstasy before it set off at a bound.

The Bird E, which Allen was naturally Sharing with, eventually noticed the approaching monster. It was a being that he was very familiar with.

Huh?! It's the murdergalsh from before. It's heading straight for me.

The monster had managed to close the distance quite significantly before Allen caught sight of it. It was only several kilometers away by this point.

What should I do? Can I outrun it? My Agility's gone up a lot more since three years ago.

Allen racked his brains trying to work out what the best course of action would be. He had Cecil on his back and no idea where Dagrah would pop out from. If possible, he preferred to avoid getting into combat. However…

"What's wrong?"

As it turned out, Allen was not very good at maintaining a poker face. Either that, or Cecil had an exceptionally sharp intuition. Either way, she picked up on the change in his demeanor almost immediately.

"Huh? Ah, well…we're now being chased by a murdergalsh too."

"*What*?!"

Allen candidly explained that the monster was several kilometers away and currently heading straight for their location.

"In this situation, being chased by two pursuers at the same time will make things very complicated, so I'm considering killing the murdergalsh first before going any farther."

With my current abilities and stats, I should be able to kill the murdergalsh. The best way to handle this is to kill it first before continuing on.

"You…can beat a murdergalsh?"

"I think so. After all, it wouldn't be my first time fighting it." *I fully analyzed what it's capable of three years ago.*

“All right.” Cecil believed in Allen’s strength, so much so that when he said he could win, she did not question it.

Several minutes later, the murdergalsh had caught up to them. Allen faced off against it, with Cecil already hidden safely a distance away.

Okay, now that Cecil is safe, it’s time to get rid of this pest.

“AAAAAUUUUHHH!”

With a human-dog face, a humanlike upper torso and arms, and a wolflike lower torso, this one-eyed murdergalsh was the very one that had chased Allen for three days straight all those years ago. The five-meter-tall monster was so excited about getting to fight him again that it was unable to wipe the smirk off its face.

“Look, mutt, I don’t have much time. Let’s get this done and over with.”

After declaring that he would instant K.O. the murdergalsh, Allen Summoned twenty Beast Ds around the monster and sent them all charging in at once. It was the same simple strategy that had worked on both orc kings and armored queen ants: whittle the enemy down with sheer numbers.

As expected, Spider Silk isn’t very effective. It’s not lowering the mudergalsh’s speed by any noticeable degree. There’s no point in using up card slots for them when I can have more Beast Ds instead. Ah, Brons, hold it down!

Based on his experience fighting against other Rank B monsters, Allen came up with the idea to use four Stone Ds to hold the murdergalsh down from all four sides. This made it much easier for the Beast Ds to land their attacks, which meant the battle could finish faster and with fewer Beast D casualties.

Even so, Beast Ds kept getting killed one after the other. At the same time, Allen’s grimoire flapped furiously overhead, Creating, Strengthening, and Summoning more as replacements. The Teddys continued spamming Crush, drawing blood from all over the murdergalsh’s body. As it writhed in pain, Allen kept throwing iron balls at its remaining left eye.

If possible, Allen wanted to completely rob the monster of its sight. Even if he himself got done in, there was a chance for Cecil to survive. However, Allen was having difficulty getting his throws to land, even with his stats being so much higher after all the level-ups and buffs from cards. Without the element of surprise on his side, the murdergalsh had no issue swatting all the iron balls down.

An orc king would have already died by now. I guess this is an upper Rank B for you. But still, I think we’re almost there.

About ten minutes in, the murdergalsh was bleeding from all over and seemed on the verge of collapsing. That very moment, however, it flexed its back legs and leaped with every ounce of strength it had remaining.

“AUUUUUUH!”

“Huh?!”

CRAAAAASH.

After running out of iron balls, Allen had retreated about twenty or so meters back to direct his Summons from a safe distance away. However, in the blink of an eye, the murdergalsh came crashing down at his location. In a panic, Allen willed all the Beast Ds to rush back to his side, but they were too far away. He had kept four Stone Ds at his side just now as a precaution, but the monster swept them all away with a single blow, desperate adrenaline coursing through its body. Then it grabbed Allen with both its hands and started squeezing him like an iron vise.

Uh-oh, am I in trouble now?

"A-ALLEEEEEN!" Cecil screamed from her position at the far back from which she had been observing the fight.

Allen shouted back, "I-I'm fine, milady!" but Cecil very much doubted it.

While he braced himself against the murdergalsh's grip, his grimoire repeatedly Created and Synthesized cards in a frenzied fury. At the same time, he did his best to reassure Cecil and warn her not to approach.

Despite bleeding all over, the murdergalsh was back to smirking with its hair-raisingly disgusting grin. It stared closely at Allen as it gradually clenched harder and harder, fully intent on slowly torturing the boy instead of killing him off in one swift strike.

Allen was supposed to have died a while ago being crushed in this way. Sure enough, his bones shattered and he spat up blood, but he managed to hold on by using Leaves of Life liberally. Several minutes later, the murdergalsh suddenly loosened its grip, grabbed Allen by his head, then chomped on him with an affected air. Its fangs pierced his abdomen, sending blood exploding like a fountain. From her position in the distance, Cecil crumbled to her knees, mumbling Allen's name in a small voice filled with despair.

Just as it seemed like everything was over…

"So, mutt. Turns out you're the type who eats from the tail first instead of the head. I had you pegged wrong."

With a single utterance referencing the two ways of eating fish-shaped taiyaki, Allen got out his short sword from Storage and held it firmly in his hand.

Since you ate me from the bottom first, I'll attack you…here!

Allen used every last ounce of strength he could muster in his upper body and jabbed the short sword directly into the murdergalsh's left eye.

"AAAAAUUUUUUUUUHHHHHHHH!"

The monster screamed in absolute agony and flailed around, scattering gelatinous vitreous humor everywhere.

Perfect. Now both its eyes are gone. To follow up…

Allen wiggled the short sword, pushing it deeper. Soon, his entire arm was buried within the gushing eyeball. Even so, he continued pushing with all his might.

"How's that for size, eh, mutt? If you don't bite down harder, I just might finish you off first!"

Despite the sword in its eye, the murdergalsh still refused to spit Allen back out. It tried biting harder to finish the boy off, but for some reason, its teeth could not clamp down any further.

“Tough, right? And I’m only going to get tougher. It’s your loss, and the reason is because you took your sweet time instead of killing me straight off.”

The instant he had gotten caught, Allen had started changing the cards in his holders to Stone D, which buffed his HP and Endurance by 20. As a result of him Creating forty-eight copies of it, his HP was closing in on 2,000 and his Endurance was almost 1,500.

When it figured out that it could not crush Allen with its teeth, the murdergalsh shifted to crushing him with its hands. Allen paid its efforts no mind, focusing solely on driving his sword in further.

“Listen up, you mutt. Stats never let you down.”

There was no way to determine the murdergalsh’s exact stats, but the fact that it could not kill Stone Ds with Defend activated meant that its Attack had to be under 2,000. Based on this fact, Allen figured that he was more than capable of finishing off this monster if he continued using Leaves of Life. During the brief naps he had caught during this journey, he had created hundreds of them just in case Dagrah really did catch up.

How long has it been since I felt such an adrenaline rush? This is what I’m talking about!

A similar situation had happened to Allen in his previous life. When he faced a boss that was capable of ending him in several hits, he had to keep a close eye on his HP and rely on spamming healing items while slowly whittling the monster’s HP down. He was doing the same thing here, constantly casting glances at his grimoire to see how much HP he had remaining and carefully timing the uses of Leaves of Life.

The sword had already reached the bone behind the eye and was still going deeper. Although the bone stopped the sword, Allen continued pushing until cracks began forming.

Before long…

“AAAAAAUUUUUUUUHHHHHHHHH!!!”

The socket shattered and gave way for the sword to reach the monster’s brain. The murdergalsh screamed the loudest it ever had, then collapsed to the ground. It spat Allen out and convulsed violently, but eventually stopped moving altogether.

<You have defeated 1 murdergalsh. You have earned 82,000 XP.>

“Hmm, this is my complete and utter victory. Though the bottom half of my body is now all sticky and gross.”

“ALLEN!” Cecil rushed over. She looked at Allen from head to toe, checking for injuries.

“Now, what should we do?”

“What do you m— Oh no.”

The next instant after sighing with relief at seeing Allen alive and well, Cecil noticed the man who had just showed up. It was, of course, Dagrah.

“I *finally* caught up with you little shits!” Dagrah screeched. He was so furious that his voice broke.

Ah, he’s really pissed.

“You aren’t getting away anymore!”

So he’s finally caught us. Though I’d already realized he would when the murdergalsh bit me.

Not a single one of the Bird Es that had been scouting in the sky remained. The moment he had found Dagrah again, the need for scouting had disappeared. He had replaced the cards with more Stone Ds instead.

Dagrah approached, one step at a time. It was as if time had slowed down. He shot a glance at the dead murdergalsh by Allen’s side, but did not seem particularly interested. A mere murdergalsh was not worth his attention. When he directed his gaze back toward Allen, Allen returned the look and pushed Cecil behind himself protectively.

I have no more iron balls left, and my short sword is still inside the murdergalsh. My Summons are too slow to match Dagrah’s speed. But funnily enough, when I have so few options, it makes it easy to figure out what I have to do.

“Please stand back, Lady Cecil!” Allen shouted, spreading both hands as wide as he could. “I’ll hold him back!” *Hopefully, he’ll focus his attention on me now.*

“What’s this? The model servant, ain’tcha? You’re putting your own life on the line? That sorta shit really pisses me off!”

Dagrah used some special power to close in on Allen at high speed and kicked him far away.

“Oof!” Seriously? I was looking right at him and he still disappeared from view. My eyes can’t keep up at all.

“Allen!” Cecil screamed, rushing over. However, Dagrah sent her flying with a slap. She lost consciousness from that single blow.

“What’s the matter?” Dagrah asked mockingly. “You not gonna attack me? C’mon, bring out those monsters of yours again.” When Allen remained silent, he smirked. “I see. You used up all your MP fighting this monster?”

After shaking his head to regain his cool, Allen returned, “And haven’t you used up your MP chasing us too? How about saving some for your trip home?”

Dagrah scoffed. “I obviously have MP potions, duh. Don’t put me on the same level as you.”

Looks like we have a chatterbox here. Good, good. So, he does use MP for his skills. This confirms a hypothesis that I’d had all along.

“Brats like you need proper education.”

“What could someone who ran away from the battlefield after a year with his tail between his legs teach me?”

“Y-You fucking piece of shit!”

Allen once again lost sight of Dagrah and found himself blasted through the air. The man was so furious that he felt he had to give the boy a slow and thorough thrashing. As the blows fell like rain, Allen worked out a certain question in his mind. Specifically, what skills were. To his understanding, there were three types in this world.

- First, the kind that Allen had received along with his grimoire when he turned one (e.g., Summoning, Creation)
- Second, the kind that he gained by repeating the relevant action (e.g., Sword Mastery, Throwing)
- Third, Extra Skills (which Allen did not possess)

The first difference between the first and second types that came to mind was whether they cost MP or not. Throwing did not cost MP, but Summoning did—at least, it did during the Creation stage. This led to the next question: how were skills displayed on the Status screens of everyone else in this world? What Dagrah just said had provided a hint to the answer. His indirect confirmation that he had to spend MP to use his skills meant his Status window most likely looked like the following.

Dagrah’s Status Window (According to Allen’s Prediction)
Skills: Scout {5}, Steal {5}, Swift Foot {4}, Sharp Hearing, Stealthy Steps, Presence Sensing, Sword Mastery {5}
Extra Skill: Tracking

Dagrah likely had a basic skill corresponding to his class—like how Allen had Summoning—as well as a few others that branched off of his capabilities as a Scout that became unlocked with each level-up of the basic skill.

The answer had been in front of my face at the very start. It was written right there in the explanation text for Hell Mode that I read before I came over to this world. The text implies that everyone with a class gets a skill tied to said class. Cecil’s Status window very likely has Magic {1} or something similar.

Hell Mode
The only skills you start out with are the ones tied to your class...

One way that those with a class were distinct from those without was how much their stats increased upon leveling up. However, this was something that could only be seen in their Status windows and generally

could not be objectively determined or confirmed by anyone else, short of getting Appraised. Allen had come to the conclusion that there was one other, much easier method to determine whether someone had a class or not: whether they had a skill—or skills—that required MP to activate that could only be developed by repeatedly spending MP.

Dagrah is so strong because he has a class and he's diligently raised both his level and his skill levels.

"What a creepy-ass little shit you are. The fuck you grinning about?"

"Guh!"

To think that someone with a mere one- or two-star class can get this strong! Just how powerful can I, with my eight-star class, get?

A broad grin covered Allen's face from ear to ear even though he was being endlessly beaten with blows faster than he could follow.

An hour later, Allen laid on the ground looking like a ragged dishcloth, with Dagrah standing over him, breathing heavily.

"How the fuck are you so tough? You a Monk class? Is that monster over there related somehow?"

Even Dagrah did not start out with the intention of beating up Allen for a whole hour. He had shifted from torturing the boy to seriously trying to kill him quite a while ago, but due to the stat buffs from his cards raising his HP and Endurance to ridiculous numbers, combined with his spamming of Leaves of Life, Allen had managed to doggedly cling onto life this entire time.

"Are you done attacking me? Then you should turn back and return to Carnel City. Before you get killed."

He even used his freaking mithril rapier on me! That actually hurt like crazy. Ugh, I'm almost out of Leaves of Life. Once you go down, I'm taking that rapier of yours.

"Hah! Who's gonna kill me? You?"

"You still can't tell? I see, so you don't have area detection abilities, despite having a Scout-like class." *I'm really learning so much from this encounter.*

"The fuck you talking about? Even if you stall for time, you're still gonna die in the end."

"It took you way too long…"

"What do you m—" Dagrah cut himself off as he suddenly noticed the dust cloud being thrown up by someone approaching at an incredible speed. As he stepped back from Allen and raised his guard, Captain Zenof suddenly appeared before his eyes.

"Hm, are you still alive?" the knight asked calmly.

"Honestly, I'm only hanging on by a thread. Couldn't you have run faster please?" replied the parrot on the knight captain's shoulder with Allen's voice.

"Come now, you know I can't run as fast as you. And here you are, still alive. I would say I made it in time."

There was a Bird E circling in the sky above. When Allen passed through the border checkpoint, he had sent off a Bird E and a Bird G together, the former to find Zenof, the latter to explain the situation to him. Having already learned about Allen's ability beforehand, the man believed the Summons immediately and promptly rushed over.

Heh heh. Go get 'em for me, please, Boss.

Allen was not picky with how his enemies went down. If the knight captain would do it for him, then he was more than happy to yield the challenge.

"Hmph, Zenof."

"That's my name."

Oh? Dagrah knows Zenof? Is it because they were on the battlefield together?

"Look at this parasite leeching off of a noble, showing up like he's hot stuff."

Uh, you're employed by a noble too, aren't you?

"A 'parasite leeching off of a noble'?"

"You heard me. I'm sure you know what I mean. You saw how nobles use commoners like they're disposable pawns on the battlefield, didn't you?"

"Well, can't argue with that."

"Right? And those who fight with their lives on the line for those shitty nobles are shit themselves. That includes you."

"Is that so?"

"What did you get for protecting that stupid fortress for ten years? Now you're only leading a ragtag bunch of sorry excuses for knights here in this godforsaken countryside. What a reward! Sounds like the biggest fucking joke ever."

Right after speaking, Dagrah abruptly disappeared. The dirt and grass being kicked up into a cloud indicated that he had not fled but was still around, just moving too fast for Allen's eyes to register.

"Allen, stand back," Zenof said, his voice like naked steel. "You'll get caught up otherwise."

"Yes, Sir."

The anger in Zenof's voice was so palpable and terrifying that Allen was already backing up before he knew it. He unconsciously stumbled backward even more due to surprise as, in the next moment, an aura sprang up around the knight captain's body like a heat haze as he slowly drew his sword.

I see, this visual effect must be the indicator of someone using their Extra Skill. Which reminds me, Captain Zenof never used it when he fought the orc king.

Even in a situation like this, Allen discovered a new fact.

"Where do you think yer lookin' at?! Die, you insect!"

Dagrah abruptly reappeared and thrust his rapier straight at Zenof's heart. However, the weapon stopped at the man's chest, refusing to dig in any further.

“We fought for everyone’s sake,” Zenof growled. “Then all my brothers-in-arms died, every last one of them, leaving me the sole survivor.”

“Fuck! How fucking hard *are* you?”

Dagrah ignored what Zenof was saying and desperately focused on pushing his rapier forward. It penetrated the knight’s armor, but despite him using both hands, the tip of the weapon failed to draw even a single drop of blood.

Wow, his Endurance must be really high. So this is a Sword Master. I probably can’t even imagine just how much fighting he must have done on the battlefield.

Clearly, Dagrah’s Attack stat was nowhere near enough to hurt the knight captain with his rare two-star class, Sword Master.

“We all risked our lives and fought with every last drop of blood we had! No one—*no one* is allowed to deny what we did!”

Zenof raised his sword and brought it down, bisecting Dagrah’s body diagonally from the shoulder. The slash generated a shockwave that roared a hundred meters into the distance, tearing the ground apart and sending grass and dirt bursting into the air. Allen gasped at the raw power of the knight captain’s Extra Skill.

And this was how the three-day-long game of tag between Allen and Dagrah came to an end.

Chapter 14: Starting a New Quest

The day after Zenof killed Dagrah, Allen and Cecil finally made it back to Granvelle City. When Allen stopped before the front gate to look up at the mansion with Cecil on his back, the guard recognized them right away and rushed inside to inform the baron of their return. The sight of his flustered response convinced the pair that they had truly come home.

Phew, we're finally back. Feels like it's been ages since I last saw the mansion. So, my spoils from the past few days are the murdergalsh's Rank B magic stone and Dagrah's mithril rapier.

The magic stone was a given, since he was the one who had killed the monster, but Allen considered it a stroke of fortune gaining the rapier too. The knight captain had told him to take it. Apparently Allen was terrible at hiding his thoughts; his face made it clear as day just how much he had wanted the weapon.

"Lady Cecil, I'm setting you down now."

"All right."

The knight captain had accompanied the children for the remainder of their return journey. However, it was Allen, not Zenof, who had carried Cecil back on his back. He did not let her down right until before the door to the house. When they stepped inside, they found all the members of the baron's family waiting in the entrance hall.

"Cecil…"

"Father, I am back."

Even though this was supposed to be a touching reunion, everyone's eyes were on Allen, not Cecil. When the baron noticed this and turned to look at him, the relief on his face immediately gave way to alarm.

He barked at Sebas, "Call a doctor right now!"

"Yes, Master!"

After nearly being eaten by the murdergalsh, then getting pummeled and slashed by Dagrah for over an hour, Allen's current appearance was absolutely deplorable. His clothes were now mere rags wrapped around his body, their design barely held together by the last few threads. The ripped edges were plastered with the blood he had lost when he suffered each wound. Given how he looked, anyone would conclude that he was on the verge of death.

However, when he realized that everyone was worried for him, Allen swung his arms in an exaggerated manner. "No, no, I'm entirely fine! I've already used recovery potions on myself!"

Another lesson learned: I should keep several sets of my uniform inside Storage. That, and I need to take countermeasures against getting poisoned. Of course, that includes stocking up on antidotes, but…I wonder if there are items that help protect against the kind of instant-acting sleeping agent that got me this time?

Through this incident, Allen had learned a lot of information that he otherwise would not have cooped up in the White Dragon Mountains, hunting solo. He was aware that this had proven to be quite the educational experience indeed. Being able to test several of his hypotheses in his fight with Dagrah had been a boon. For example, no message had appeared in the grimoire when Dagrah died, meaning that killing humans did not yield any XP.

This incident gave me so much.

Allen was instructed to come to the dining hall to deliver his report after taking a bath. Everyone was then dismissed. Water was drawn up for him and he got to enjoy his first-ever bath at the mansion.

When he walked into the dining hall wearing brand-new clothes, he was urged to take the seat at the middle of the long dinner table. The baron usually sat at the end of the table, but today he had adopted the position directly across from Allen. Cecil soon arrived as well.

The baron started the conversation. “I’m sure you’re tired, having just gotten back, but we have to decide our next move. Explain in detail everything that happened.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Since everyone was present, Allen began his account. He told of being kidnapped and stowed aboard the magic ship, the conversation he overheard between Viscount Carnel and the royal envoy, jumping off the magic ship and running toward Granvelle City on foot, encountering and killing the murdergalsh along the way, being caught by Dagrah, and eventually being saved by the knight captain.

“I see. So there’s no doubt that Viscount Carnel is the mastermind.”

“Yes, my lord. He is working with the royal envoy who visited the other day. Their aim is the mining rights of all the mithril mines.”

Allen explained how the royal envoy needed money to prop up the judicial vice-minister, a man from his own faction, as the new judicial minister. The viscount, who had been relying on mithril money to throw his weight around all this time, was now in dire straits without that income. Thus the two plotted to seize half the mining rights from Granvelle. It would really throw a wrench in their plans if Baron Granvelle were to bring the matter directly to the royal family, who were not in on the con. This was why they had kidnapped Cecil, to keep the baron in check.

“So that’s what happened. Thank you for telling me, Allen. Sebas, we’re heading to the royal palace *now*!”

“Understood, Master.”

The baron had both fists clenched on top of the table—Allen had never seen him look this furious. The rage from having his daughter taken away from him fueled his burning desire to have the viscount and envoy charged and thrown behind bars as soon as possible.

He's heading to the royal palace? Now? Just like that? Alarm bells went off in Allen's head before he asked out loud, "My lord, may I ask what you will be doing at the palace?"

"Isn't it obvious? To let His Majesty know of everything that Viscount Carnel did. I'm sure he would take action on a matter such as this."

You being sure won't be enough, though. That might be true if you were up against the viscount alone, but what do you plan on doing about the royal envoy? He'd likely just give some random excuse and cut the viscount off like a lizard's tail. If all the blame falls on the viscount, the envoy gets off scot-free.

"I have a suggestion for how to resolve this incident. May I share it?"

Allen and the baron had been the only people talking all this time. The rest of the baron's family was present, as was the knight captain, but understandably, everyone's attention was focused on Allen, the person who had literally risked his life to save Cecil.

"Let's hear it."

"My lord, I want to give you all thirty percent of the mining rights I possess." The entire dining hall gasped in shock, but Allen paid them no mind. "Please use that share of the rights to convince the royal family to thoroughly investigate what happened and to set up safeguards so that it doesn't happen again."

The baron's face froze. "Y-You mean, *b-bribe* the royal family t-t-to take action on my behalf?" he stuttered, clearly shaken. "To do the very thing Viscount Carnel did?"

"That is correct, my lord." I mean, you did try to do the same thing to get Cecil exempted from her duty, right? Though I guess that's a bit different.

"B-But, that's..."

"Knights fight in the manner befitting knights. However, my lord, you are a noble. The way I see it, nobles ought to fight in their own manner."

"Fighting...in the manner befitting nobles?"

"Yes, my lord. Would you please look down at your hands on the table?"

"Hm? Why?"

Allen commanded the entire dining hall's attention. The baron did as he was told, as if hypnotized. Everyone else also looked at his hands, curious where Allen was going with this.

"My lord, now is the time to dirty those hands. Please show us how you fight as a noble."

Sebas blurted out, "Allen, watch what you say!" He could not help himself after seeing Allen so blatantly overstep his bounds as manservant.

"No, it's fine, Sebas."

"Master—" The butler cut himself off as he saw the tears streaming down his master's face.

Staring at his own hands with a brooding look, the baron said, "You see, Allen...my father departed from this world when I was about your age. At

the time, he told me, ‘Take good care of this realm. Protect it with your older brother.’”

“Yes, my lord.”

“My older brother was barely of age when he assumed the title of lord of Granvelle. I did my best to manage this land with him, but he joined our father right before turning twenty. This still holds true today, but I had to rely on Sebas so much back then. I thank you, Sebas.”

The age of adulthood is fifteen for nobles too, if I remember correctly.

The butler wordlessly lowered his head in response to the baron’s words of appreciation. Allen stayed silent, waiting for the baron to continue.

“Just as my father did, my older brother taught me to be an upright noble, and I’ve done everything in my power to live by those teachings so far. However, I must have misunderstood something somewhere… So, this is how nobles fight, huh? To think I’d be admonished by a child as young as I was back then…” The baron clenched both hands and stood up. “Very well, I will fight in the manner of nobles. Allen, I will be taking you up on your offer of your mining rights. Sebas, prepare for our departure.”

“Immediately, Master.”

Now we should be good. Everyone who participated when Carnel baited them with promises of mining rights shares will surely bite once the baron dangles those rights in front of their faces for real. Now, there’s only one more thing I want to ask him for before he heads to the capital.

Just as the baron was about to leave, Allen said, “Um, my lord, I don’t mean to ask for this in exchange for the mining rights, but… May I know what the duty of House Granvelle is?”

I’ve left it unexplained long enough, I think. It’s time to insist on this.

“Hm…” After a short pause, the baron answered, “Very well. I’ll arrange for a tutor to give you a lesson.”

Huh? He’s going that far to explain? Is it going to be like a lesson on royal service in general?

Without further ado, the baron left for the royal capital with the butler and, for protection’s sake, the vice-captain in tow.

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The storm that swept through the royal court at the end of that year would later come to be known as “the House Granvelle Affair.” As a result of everything that ensued, a group of nobles, Viscount Carnel included, were charged with corruption and forgery of official documents and brought to justice. The viscount insisted that Baron Granvelle was making everything up right to the very end, but when he refused to cooperate with the royal family’s investigative efforts, he was slapped with insurrection charges, and one thousand of the kingdom’s most powerful knights were dispatched to his fiefdom. The knights uncovered so much evidence that Viscount Carnel was divested of his title, and his realm was confiscated and incorporated into the lands under the royal family’s direct management.

Even a royal envoy and the judicial vice-minister, both highly eminent positions, had been implicated in the scandal, causing nobles to speculate in whispers what drove the royal family to go so far. Many were jailed, with noble houses going back generations erased entirely. The kingdom was wrapped up in a purge so intense, it matched, if not exceeded, the Talent fraud incident.

According to rumors, the root cause of the incident was Viscount Carnel kidnapping Baron Granvelle's daughter over mithril mining rights, with the baron then raising hell in the royal capital in a mad rage. For the sake of getting revenge, he yielded full rights of his newly discovered mine to the royal family in order to have all the royal retainers and multiple political factions thoroughly investigated and, where necessary, punished.

Some wondered whether the baron had really done all this just to get revenge for a single daughter, but no one pushed him for the full truth. Now that the baron had the royal family and multiple political factions on his side, no noble dared even look at him wrong anymore.

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Several days had passed since the baron had set off for the royal capital. Allen was asked to stay with Cecil and protect her until the baron's return—of course, he accepted. Consequently, he spent most of the entire day stuck in her room.

According to Zenof, Vice-Captain Leibrand would not be able to defeat someone of Dagrah's level; this was why Zenof now protected the mansion together with several of his knights, leaving Leibrand to accompany the baron on his trip. Bird Es and Bird Ds constantly circled in the sky, Hawk Eye and Night Vision permanently activated. Honestly, all this security did not seem that necessary, as the chances of the viscount making a move were very low. With the baron using the mithril mining rights for negotiation, there were no more cards for the viscount to play.

Now that he was Cecil's constant companion, Allen ended up sitting in on her lessons and receiving his own portions whenever she had tea or snacks. And ever since returning, her prickly attitude toward him had softened. It was making him miss her former self a little.

The two were currently in the conference room on the third floor. They had been led here by Captain Zenof, who had told them this would be where they would be conducting the day's lesson.

"The conference room?" Allen murmured in slight bewilderment.

"That's right," Zenof replied. "This is because you asked to learn the details of House Granvelle's duty."

"What?"

"The tutor will arrive soon. I'm sure I don't have to say this, but the details that you will learn today must remain secret."

The captain left the room, but quickly returned with the magic tutor, holding the old man's large bag for him.

Uh, the magic tutor?

Right after stepping in, the tutor turned to Zenof, "*Everything*, yes?"

Zenof nodded. "Tell him everything. My lord has given his express permission," he replied in a surprisingly respectful tone before leaving the room once more.

"Goodness gracious..."

Did he come all this way just for my sake? Allen bowed deeply. "Thank you very much for today, sir."

"Mm. The first thing to say is, everything I will now tell you is strictly confidential. It won't be covered even in the Academy's entrance exam."

"Understood."

"It *is* rumored about by those with looser lips, but if it gets out of hand, the royal family will take direct action. As such, I strongly recommend against sharing it for no reason."

So this is something actively being hushed up?

"Now, what was it that you wanted to know that led you to this topic?"

Hey, he did this during my magic lesson too. I guess asking questions is his way of teaching.

"My question was what House Granvelle's duty is." Allen shared how he had heard from Rickel, the head manservant, that the kingdom was not at war but then also gleaned through the kidnappers' conversation that there was indeed a battlefield somewhere.

"I see. I'll start by confirming what that idler Rickel said; he's not incorrect. However, what he had learned was kingdom history."

Uh, did he just offhandedly dis Rickel? "Why is it '*kingdom* history'? Is it not just 'history'?"

"In order to know the truth of this world, you need to learn Demon Lord history." The wizened old man spread a large folded piece of parchment.

"Is this a world map?"

Despite only having ever seen a map of the realm of Granvelle, Allen somehow picked up on the fact that he was now looking at the entire world. It depicted several masses that were likely continents.

"Mm, it is indeed. You're as sharp as ever, lad. The largest continent, this one in the middle, is where we are. This is the Central Continent."

"Oh?!" Hey, we live on a pretty big continent. Rickel once told me that there's an empire to the north that's several times the size of our kingdom. That means this large region must be the empire, and this small country below it is us. So, we're in the southern portion of the Central Continent.

"This is where we live: the Kingdom of Ratash. And north of us is the Empire of Giamut," the tutor said, tapping the countries' respective locations on the map.

I wonder how much of this Cecil already knows. The baron already told her most everything, right?

Cecil simply stared at the map in silence as the lesson continued with Allen and the tutor doing all the talking. Allen recalled how the baron had told her about House Granvelle's duty on the day news of Mihai's demise

arrived, but he was not sure how detailed the baron's explanation had been. Was the part of the map she was staring at related to the battlefield that had taken Mihai's life?

"Judging by the name 'Demon Lord history,' a Demon Lord has appeared in this world?"

The tutor found himself struck speechless for a brief moment by how unfazed Allen seemed upon learning of the existence of the Demon Lord, but he then tapped a finger on the map. "Yes, the Demon Lord was born 112 years ago on the Forgotten Continent, the northernmost one."

"How do you know that?"

"The Demon Lord said so himself."

The one claiming to be the Demon Lord had sent a proclamation to all the world's heads of state that read: "I am the Demon Lord of the End, the one who shall bring about the demise of this world. Submit to me."

"What did the nations do?"

"They all ignored him. There was no reason for them to make a decision about it either way."

The Demon Lord, for his part, did nothing afterward. Fifty years passed. With each transfer of power, the nations of the world began to forget his proclamation more and more. That was, until sixty-two years ago, when he once again urged the countries of the world to "submit to him." This time, there was one more line: "There will be no more chances."

"And everyone ignored it again?"

"That's right. Then, the Great Calamity occurred that year."

"What happened?"

"The Demon Lord strengthened all monsters throughout the world by one rank."

There was no way to know for sure that it was his doing, as he did not claim responsibility afterward. Even so, the large majority of people attributed the disaster to him.

In any case, this marked the dawn of an age of terror. All the monsters in the world had ranked up: Rank E monsters had become as strong as Rank D; in the same way, D had become C, C had become B, B had become A, and A had turned into the as yet unheard-of S. It was said that Rank S monsters had power rivaling that of Minor Deities.

The powered-up monsters, drunk on their newfound strength, went on a rampage, massacring people who had been living in peace all this time. During that year alone, millions had lost their lives.

Hold on, isn't this the answer to what I've been asking all this time?

Ever since he took down his first albaheron, Allen had nursed the feeling that monsters in this world seemed stronger than their rank indicated. This sense of discrepancy, this intuition that something was off, had nagged him the entire time.

“What happened to the actual ranks of the monsters, then? If the Demon Lord made them all one rank stronger, does it mean the ranks assigned to them also went up by one?”

“Good question, but no, the ranks were left as is. It is the Adventurer’s Guild that assigns ranks to monsters, and they decided to leave all the rankings the same.”

I see, so there is an actual reason goblins all look so muscular, and why neither the knights nor adventurers could do a thing against the murdergalsh.

Due to the Great Calamity, the Rank B murdergalsh now had the strength of a Rank A monster. In the same way, the Rank A white dragon possessed fighting strength on par with Rank S, making it a truly unassailable being.

The tutor continued his lecture. As it turned out, the Great Calamity was but the overture. That same year, an army of several million under the Demon Lord’s command crossed the seas to attack the Central Continent. The Kingdom of Cortes, the Kingdom of Gamelo, and the Principality of Bashli were all wiped out in that year.

“Three whole countries disappeared in a single year?”

“Mm, that is so. Even after that, what we today call the Demon Lord Army continued pressing its attack.”

Three years later, the Demon Lord Army also annihilated the Kingdom of Rastuli. This rocked the entire world.

“Why was it that big of a deal?”

“You see, Rastuli was a midsize country multiple times the size of our own Ratash. And yet, it only took the Demon Lord Army three years to obliterate it. This was an incredible shock.”

The first three that had fallen were tiny nations on the northernmost edge of the continent. Unlike them, however, Rastuli shared a border with Giamut and had enough power to deal with the empire on equal footing. This meant it was by no means a pushover.

The story of the nation’s last moments became public, and the world was shaken once again. Supposedly, when the Demon Lord Army had surrounded the capital, the king had begged for his people to be spared in exchange for his own life, but the demons had rebuffed him, saying, “We already gave two opportunities to surrender. You are the ones who refused us. Now, grab your weapons and fight to your last breaths.”

The Demon Lord Army had forced a country that had already surrendered to continue fighting. After this exchange with the king, the fight naturally turned single-sided. According to the refugees who managed to escape to Giamut through secret passages, it was a massacre beyond description. The enemy forces advanced relentlessly until not a single human life remained within what used to be Rastuli. Less than half of its population managed to escape to Giamut.

“In other words, the Demon Lord has no interest in ruling over humans.”

“Correct. His title implied that he, too, was some kind of ruler. As such, the world expected him to reign over the lands and peoples he conquered, albeit in some twisted demonic way. However, that was not so.”

Everyone had assumed that the newest Demon Lord was a king hell-bent on subjugating and commanding the entire world. However, nothing could have been further from the truth. No, this Demon Lord intended to wipe out all life in this world.

Allen had only asked about the duty of House Granvelle. Before giving him the answer, the magic tutor had dived into a history lesson on a scale that entirely exceeded his expectations. And there was still more.

“Two years after destroying Rastuli—that is, fifty-seven years ago—the Demon Lord Army launched their assault on the Giamutan Empire.”

This marked the start of a war between the superpower that controlled two-thirds of the Central Continent and the demons. Having seen what became of Rastuli, Giamut did not hesitate to bring all its forces to bear on the front.

The current world map showed the Demon Lord Army located at the northern borders of Giamut. That implied that the empire was successfully keeping it at bay. And thanks to that, Ratash, the kingdom where Allen lived, remained safe.

“So the empire managed to beat the demons back.”

“That is not so. Giamut’s forces kept losing battle after battle. Though they were not as overwhelmed as the four countries that had already fallen had been, the empire continued losing to the point where the large majority of their border fortresses had fallen. The best it could do was slow the advance of the demons. So Giamut formed the Five Continent Alliance.”

“The five continents teamed up?”

As soon as he determined that the Demon Lord Army was far too powerful for his country to handle alone, the emperor of Giamut immediately approached the heads of state in the four other continents—excluding the Forgotten Continent where the Demon Lord lived—with talks of an alliance. This was what led to the formation of the Five Continent Alliance that was still active to this day.

“You see, the Demon Lord had made a grave mistake. Instead of focusing his attacks on the Central Continent, he also attacked the Empire of Baukis and Rozenheim, the major powers on two other continents, at the same time.”

The magic tutor pointed to a landmass northwest of the Central Continent half its size and to another in the northeast a third of its size, introducing them in turn.

The great power on the northwestern continent was the Empire of Baukis, a country ruled by dwarves. They possessed prodigious technological prowess and were the source of all the magic ships in use worldwide. Sixty percent of the magic tools in Ratash came from Baukis. The country commanded military might surpassing that of Giamut in the

form of tens of thousands of golem troops that exceeded even the magic ships in size.

On the northeastern continent was Rozenheim, the country ruled by elves. Both the continent and country were named after Rozen, a spirit who had surpassed the power of a common spirit to reach the realm of a Minor Deity, gaining command over all spirits in existence. Through his contract with the queen of Rozenheim, this Sovereign of Spirits lent his power to the entire elven race, enabling them to repel the demonic invasion using powerful Spirit Magic.

Due to the Demon Lord attacking three continents simultaneously, the leading powers in all three became equally aware of the threat the Demon Lord Army posed, and in no time at all, they pushed through the formation of the Alliance. This led to the establishment of a system for countries not on the front line to supply troops and supplies to those that were.

"This improved the situation somewhat, but the Alliance's forces still continued losing their battles."

An allied force was formed and deployed, greatly bolstering the military might of Giamut. Even so, this proved insufficient to halt the demons' advance. The Demon Lord Army was not composed of mindless mobs exclusively; it had intelligent commanders who knew to strike where cooperation between the united forces was weakest, as well as the fortresses manned by foreign forces that would flee in fear at the first sign of battle. It took almost no time at all after the formation of the Five Continent Alliance for the Demon Lord Army to see through all of the cooperative effort's flaws.

"Then a truly deplorable strategy was adopted."

Unable to bear the mounting losses, Gamut demanded troops from Ratash. Being located on the Central Continent and thus a signatory of the Five Continent Alliance led by Giamut, the kingdom had no choice but to comply. So it dispatched its knights to join the war effort.

However, the demands from Giamut soon escalated. Waving the stipulations of the Alliance in Ratash's face, it pressed the kingdom to send its royals and nobles to the front lines too, even those without Talents. Now, it was common sense to conscript only those with Talents, but at the time, the Alliance attempted to resist the Demon Lord Army by simply matching number for number.

"The Demon Lord Army is composed of monsters, all Rank B or higher. Many of noble and royal birth died fruitlessly as a result of the Empire's ill-advised strategy."

We're basically talking hundreds, thousands of murdergalshes, right? No matter how many Talentless people you send, they still can't kill a murdergalsh.

The bulk of the Demon Lord Army was Rank B monsters, with a generous distribution of Rank As and several rumored Rank S monsters

mixed in. The Talentless troops were almost entirely wiped out, regardless of social class.

This was about the time the baron's father died, I think?

The baron had said that his father had died when he was around Allen's current age. That meant he had likely been sent to the front lines as a part of Ratash's response to Giamut's demands and lost his life on the battlefield.

"This was when the Alliance introduced a system of Academies, at least one per country."

In this world with levels, individuals could develop to become several, even dozens of times more powerful than they had been. As such, it was only natural to arrive at the idea of cultivating children with Talents to reach their maximum potential before sending them to the battlefield. Consequently, all the countries within the Alliance were ordered to set up at least one Academy City within their borders. The Academy's location chosen by the Kingdom of Ratash had plenty of dungeons, making it ideal for training the students.

Stipulations of the Alliance stripped authority over the Academy Cities away from the countries they were located in. After all, countries would naturally be tempted to run their Academy Cities in a way that benefited themselves instead of the allied effort. The Alliance maintained direct control over all the Academy Cities it established.

The current headmaster of the Ratashian Academy City was a high elf, a blood relative of the queen of Rozenheim who had lived for over a thousand years. He basically had free rein to run the Academy however he wanted.

"What happened then?" Though judging by how the story's going, this probably still wasn't the turning point the Alliance wanted.

The magic tutor nodded in response to the look on Allen's face. "Even with the Academy system, this proved insufficient to push back the Demon Lord's forces."

Wave after wave of millions of monsters continued to barrage Giamut's fortresses and other crucial locations, overrunning them one by one. Eventually, a fourth of the empire had fallen to the demons, and it was losing more and more habitable space. A few decades after the launch of the Demon Lord's offensive, hope had disappeared from the world and all peoples had resigned themselves to their eventual annihilation.

"However, Lord Elmea, the God of Creation, had not abandoned us. He granted Giamut a Hero."

After dwarves and elves, now we have a Hero too?

Twenty-two years ago, a commoner child with the Talent of Hero was born in the Giamutan Empire. His name was Helmios.

"It was a miracle. Helmios personified invincibility and indomitableness."

Having grown up with the hopes of the world riding on his shoulders, Helmios received the very best education possible at the Giamutan Academy City at twelve years old. He was then dispatched to the front lines

at fifteen; there, he managed feats that greatly exceeded what anyone had imagined. Rumors that verged on legend abounded, with the most commonly repeated one being “wherever the Hero goes, the land becomes stained with monster blood as far as the eye can see.” Helmios pushed the Demon Lord’s army back with the momentum of a thunderclap, restoring the original borders of Giamut in only five years. He was still fighting on the front lines at that very moment, currently striving to recover the land of lost Rastuli.

“You have heard of our kingdom’s Land Reclamation Decree, yes? His Majesty established this policy as an effort to send more supplies to the war effort.”

As a signatory to the Five Continent Alliance, Ratash was currently focusing all its energies toward increasing the volume of the support it sent to the front lines. Raising the amount of food produced locally was a large part of that drive.

So that’s the reason behind the founding of the village I was born in. And... Ah! That’s the reason there was so much pressure to hunt more great boars!

For the first time ever, Allen realized how intricately history was woven into the story of his own life. Krena Village came into being because of the Land Reclamation Decree; the Decree was issued because of a war; and there was a war because the Demon Lord was attacking all of the civilized world.

Why was the baron so bent on meeting the great boar quota that he made the trip to Krena Village in person? Why could the great boar meat produced by the village not be found in Granville City, not even on the baron’s own dinner table? These questions that had plagued Allen’s mind all these years finally had their answers. The meat was sent along, not simply to the Ratashian royal capital, but beyond, all the way to the front lines north of the Empire of Giamut. Processed meat could be kept for a long time; the beasts taken down by Allen’s father and fellow villagers were filling many soldiers’ bellies even now.

“Finally, we come to House Granvelle’s duty. As you might have guessed from everything I’ve covered so far, this is not something that only House Granvelle is charged with. Naturally, even the royal family is subject to the same obligation.”

All nobles and royals born with Talents in Ratash were conscripted for three years of compulsory service under the stipulations of the Five Continent Alliance. Even members of the royal family had no right to refuse. Everyone *had* to be posted at a fortress on the front lines to fight against the Demon Lord’s army for three years. Those who attempted to get out of this duty, as well as those who failed to graduate from the Academy, were severely punished, with some even having their families stripped of their nobility. If a royal member did so, not only would the country lose influence

within the Alliance, it would also lose trust from other countries on the world stage, incurring unmeasurable diplomatic and economic losses.

Naturally, positive reinforcement had also been woven into this system. First, a reduction in taxes was promised for the realms of any nobles who succeeded in completing his or her three years of service; furthermore, this achievement made it much easier to enter a position within the royal court. All members of the Academy Faction, which held overwhelming sway over the royal court at the moment, were nobles who had returned from military service. Additional years were required for those wishing to apply for certain higher positions; vice-captains of chivalric orders needed to have served for more than three years, whereas knight captains and members of the imperial guards—the most powerful chivalric order in the kingdom—required more than five.

The magic tutor, being a Wizard, had served his three years. After returning to Ratash, he had assumed a position at the royal court that allowed him to perform magical research, and now he had the freedom to spend his postretirement life however he wanted.

However, even after taking all the promised rewards into account, there was no denying the harshness of the compulsory service. Back when the magic tutor did his service, seventy percent of Talented youngsters lost their lives. The situation was better now, thanks to the efforts of the Hero, but even so, fifty percent never made it back home.

Allen shot Cecil a look. She had remained quiet this whole time, her crimson eyes seemingly burning a hole into Giamut's northern border on the map. In all likelihood, she was thinking of Mihai, the brother whom she had lost to this conflict against the Demon Lord.

So this is why it had to be Hell Mode, Allen thought in retrospection. This is why I had to be reincarnated. Now everything makes sense.

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November arrived and, after a month's absence, the baron finally returned to Granvelle City. Although he looked thoroughly exhausted at dinner, he declared that the matter of the viscount had been wrapped up loud enough for Allen, who was on serving duty, to hear, then ordered him to come to the conference room the next day.

When Allen obediently went to the third floor the following day, he found the baron and butler together waiting for him. The table in front of the baron was loaded with three bags in a row.

The baron gestured at the seat across from his own, so Allen obliged. The boy looked up and found a conflicted look on his employer's face.

What's the matter? He looks...hesitant about something.

Eventually, the baron broke the silence. "Allen, you've already had the lesson with the magic tutor, yes?"

"Yes, my lord."

Allen was now in full knowledge of Demon Lord history. He had learned the choices the nations had made in response to the actions of the Demon

Lord and fully understood the situation of the world as well as the burden on House Granvelle's shoulders. Once she turned fifteen, Cecil would have to enter military service with a fifty-fifty chance of survival, the very same service that had already claimed Mihai's life.

In a dejected voice, the baron said, "I tried asking His Majesty if it were possible to exempt Cecil from her duty, but he said that she had to go, case closed."

After all, after being properly nurtured, her rare two-star Talent could provide fighting strength that the front lines so desperately needed. Holding her back was not up for consideration, no matter what. The king gave his condolences, saying that it was out of his hands. That meant the baron truly had no other way out.

A well-trained mage can take out a lot more enemies than a well-trained swordsman, after all. This is all the more so for her, being not a mere one-star Mage, but a two-star Wizardess.

"So that leaves me with one request for you, Allen."

"Yes, my lord." This is what Zenof was referring to when he told me to lend the baron an ear that night we camped out, right? Now that I have the full picture, it's easy to see where the baron's going with this.

"Please attend the Academy with Cecil and protect her on the battlefield."

"Of course, my lord."

"I am aware how unreasonable my request is. Before you here are the reward for killing the murdergalsh, the reward for saving Cecil, and your wages for being Cecil's bodyguard for three years."

Each bag on the table held two hundred gold, making it six hundred in total.

The baron cast a worried look at Allen's face. He was well aware that this boy was not particularly attached to money—he had given up his mithril rights without a second thought when he thought it necessary. In the first place, he already possessed over five hundred gold from selling the materials he had gathered from armored ants. He had no great need for money.

Hm, I've already answered in the affirmative twice, but he still doesn't look convinced. I should probably say it one more time and make it clear. Talk about déjà vu—how many times have I experienced something like this before?

Back when Allen was Kenichi, he had found himself in a similar situation many times in the games he played. His first experience was a king asking him to save a princess kidnapped by a dragon. In another game, someone begged him to save a shrine maiden who had been sent as a sacrifice to appease the master of a lake. Countless village heads, town mayors, feudal lords, and kings had approached Allen with their requests. And he had accepted and granted them all.

After all, if he didn't, the story wouldn't progress.

He even recalled a few times when he had found the request too unreasonable and chose “No,” only to find the conversation stuck in an endless loop. Right now, before his eyes, was a feudal lord in the throes of despair after having his father, brother, and recently, even his son killed by the army led by a Demon Lord. And his request was to protect his one and only daughter, preventing her from meeting the same fate.

There’s no doubt; this is a quest. You can also say that the plot is finally moving. I see; in this world, it takes four years to trigger the kind of quest that you’d normally get the second day after arriving in town.

“My lord, I, Allen, shall protect Lady Cecil with my very life,” Allen declared, taking care to enunciate each syllable.

“You accept?!” The baron leaped to his feet with emotion. “You really do?!”

The boy reached out to take only one of the three bags resting on the table. “Furthermore, I’ll accept one of these bags, but may I ask for something else in exchange for the other two?”

“You wish to…exchange them? For what?”

Hah, what a noob quest-giver. It’s common sense that the completion reward is given after the quest is over. And how’d this hopelessly poor family gather six hundred gold anyway? Don’t tell me he put the mansion up as collateral?

The baron’s family was poor because he was shouldering a portion of the taxes his citizens were supposed to pay so as to lighten their burden. It would take a few more years before the mithril mining operation turned a profit. In short, Allen suspected that the baron had gone to rather absurd lengths to procure the money sitting on the table. Moreover, now that he had learned Demon Lord history, Allen knew that the other nobles—and even the royal family—of this country were destitute. No one had the leeway for extravagance, drained as they were by decades of fighting against the Demon Lord. There was no way the baron had six hundred gold sitting around in his ledgers.

“I don’t need this four hundred gold. In exchange, please exempt my family from having to pay head tax.”

“That’s all you want?”

“Um, if possible, then please exempt Krena’s family too. That’s all I want in exchange for this four hundred gold.”

“Very well. Your family’s and Krena’s families are exempt from their head tax as of now.”

Perfect, since I probably won’t be able to send money home for a while in the near future. Now that they don’t have to pay taxes, life should be much easier for both of our families. I hope Mash and Myulla will grow up healthy and happy.

“Lastly, my lord, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for giving me the opportunity to serve you, and for raising me as a member of your family throughout the past four years.” Allen dug out the Granvelle crest in his

pocket and laid it on the table. After figuring out what the baron's request would be, he had made up his mind what he had to do. As the baron waited quietly for him to finish, Allen declared, "I, Allen, will return to being a commoner. Then, as a commoner, I will protect Lady Cecil and fight the Demon Lord Army by her side."

"I see. As I'd thought."

Oh? He saw this coming?

Sebas, who had been standing behind the baron, stepped forward as if prompted. After picking up the crest Allen had left on the table, he set something else down in its place.

Allen examined the beautifully ornamented silver dagger in confusion. "What is this, my lord?"

"This," the baron replied, "is the proof of being a guest of Viscount Granvelle's household. It was forged under the royal family's auspices."

"Uh...viscount? Guest?"

"Thanks to you, Allen, House Granvelle will be a viscountship as of next year."

The baron went on to explain that he had yet to tell anyone else; he planned on announcing it over dinner that night, but wanted to let Allen to be the first to know as an expression of his gratitude for all of the boy's contributions so far. The king had been incredibly delighted by the baron splitting the proceeds from an entire mithril mine among the royal family and other noble families, touting him as a role model for striving to enrich the entire country as a whole instead of hogging all the profits to himself. As a reward for the baron's endowment and for righting wrongs, the king would be bestowing him the peerage of viscount next year.

The baron ended with a dry laugh. "To tell it like it is, I basically bought the viscountship with money."

"So you have been promoted! Please allow me to express my heartfelt congratulations." Allen bowed his head. When he looked back up, however, the look of confusion from before was back. "However, what does it mean to be a guest?"

"It means you have been accepted as a part of House Granvelle. If another noble causes you trouble, we will take your side as if you were a part of our own household. Conversely, if you cause any trouble, we promise to take responsibility and handle it for you."

In other words, House Granvelle now shared collective responsibility with Allen *and* would back him up with all it had. That was the contract implied by this crested ornamental dagger.

Allen had yet to know this, but the baron had somewhat overdone things at the royal palace, spurred as he was by Allen's words. When word of him being willing to share mithril mining rights went around, the general poverty of the nobility prompted many to leap at the opportunity and express their willingness to cooperate with the baron's investigative efforts. This was how he had managed to wrap up the affair so quickly.

A dagger as a reward… I see, so this current quest is complete. Allen thought back over the past four years as he stared at the blade. At the same time, he realized why he was here. All this time, I'd asked the question of why I had been reincarnated and forced to start this life as a newborn instead of being transmigrated. Turns out it made all the difference.

If Allen had been simply brought over, the whole chain of events that led to his current situation would not have happened. No hunting great boars with the villagers of Krena Village meant no serving House Granvelle as a manservant. No service with House Granvelle meant no attending Academy City with Cecil. Furthermore, in this world where information about the Demon Lord was so strictly controlled, he might have bumped into the Demon Lord Army and died without being any the wiser.

And there's meaning in Hell Mode too. It had to be Hell Mode. Ah, I see. So this is the answer to how I came to this world.

When he learned the truth of the world, Allen finally understood the importance of Hell Mode. Back when he was Kenichi, he had found the website that led to this world after typing "game hell mode challenging" into a search engine. In all likelihood, if he had typed "casual game," the link would not have shown up. The God of Creation had been looking for someone who was up for the challenge of the ultimate Hell Mode: being reincarnated into this world.

So, you want me, the person who selected Hell Mode, to save this world where the balancing has all gone to shit?

Those in Normal Mode—no matter how many they numbered—were powerless against the Demon Lord's army. This was a world heading for destruction due to the game balance getting completely ruined—so to say, the balancing was now complete garbage. There was no telling whether the current Hero even possessed the ability to kill the Demon Lord. This was the backdrop against which, ten years after the Hero's birth, the person that Elmea had been looking for, someone who chose Hell Mode, was brought over.

Allen strongly felt how much this world wanted—no, *needed* him.

"I accept this quest." Allen stood up and clutched the silver dagger tightly to his chest. "Please place your trust in us. I swear that Lady Cecil and I will destroy the Demon Lord together."

The first thing to do when trying to kill a Demon Lord is to look for party members. I'm getting so hyped!

The baron wanted to reply with, "Uh, I didn't ask you to go that far," but he was so overwhelmed by Allen's confidence that he swallowed his words.

Thus, Allen retired from his position as manservant of House Granvelle and became a guest of the household instead. It was time to shift the stage of the story to the Ratashian Academy City.

Side Story: The Boy Who Wished to Be a Champion

One autumn day two years after Allen had left Krena Village, the villagers were about to head out for a day of great boar hunting once again.

“I want to just use the same spear as everyone,” Dogora grumbled.

“Don’t mind that,” his father insisted almost scoldingly while pushing a long spear at his son. “Just take this one!”

“Fine! Okay.”

Standing to the side, Dogora’s mother looked on at the exchange between her husband and son, worry creasing her face.

Today was the first day that Dogora, who had turned ten years old, was participating in a great boar hunt. The boy now begrudgingly looked down at the special four-meter spear that his father had painstakingly forged for this day’s sake.

The idea to let new hunters gain levels by attacking with long spears from a safe distance that Allen had come up with two years ago was still in practice. As today was Dogora’s first hunt, he could not join the front line group that used two-meter spears.

The boy studied the spear made of steel from head to shaft, with a grip specifically adjusted to the size of his hands. The source of his discontent was not the fact that he had to attack from the back. No, what he did not like was having a weapon clearly different from what everyone else was using—the spears used by both serfs and commoners were basically wooden shafts with small metal spearheads. However, his father practically shoved his handiwork into his son’s hands.

“Stay safe, okay?” Dogora’s mom asked worriedly.

Somewhat taken by surprise at how much his parents were fussing over him, Dogora replied stutteringly, “I-I know, mom. Don’t worry about me.” He then set off as if to throw off their voices, heading for the village gate.

When Dogora drew close, a pink-haired girl brimming with energy despite the early hour noticed him and rushed over. “You’re late, Dogora!”

“You’re early, Krena,” Dogora sighed. “You got here before me, huh?”

“Yep!”

A quick pan of the area revealed around fifty other villagers who had gathered for the day’s hunt. Previously, this hunting party was almost entirely composed of serfs, with there only being the occasional commoner addition. However, many of those same hunters had been made commoner two years ago. Consequently, almost all the current participants were commoners with the exception of a few serfs aiming to climb up the social ladder. At least, this was what Allen’s father, Rodin, had told Dogora previously.

“Looks like we’re the only children.”

“Hm? Did you say something, Dogora?”

“Nah.”

There were plenty of children of Dogora’s age in Krena Village. However, it was not like all of them would be immediately cleared to join the hunting party after reaching ten years old. It was only thanks to the girl holding a four-meter spear before him that Dogora himself could be here today.

Originally, it was Krena who had convinced her father, Gerda—who happened to be one of the leaders of the hunting party—to let her participate starting this year. Then Dogora had gone to Gerda and basically said, “If she’s going, then I want to go too.” Rodin, the other leader, had given his permission too, in light of the fact that Dogora also had a battle-related Talent. Bada bing, bada boom.

Before long, Rodin shouted, “All right, we’re off!” prompting an enthusiastic roar from the rest of the party in response. Rodin and Gerda headed the procession as Dogora and Krena followed close behind.

Despite having been born a commoner, this was Dogora’s first time stepping foot outside Krena Village. He was not legally compelled to stay within the walls of his village as serfs were, but the fact that his parents managed the village’s smithy-cum-weapons shop meant there was little reason for him to leave. He took in the sights as a slight sense of anxiety mixed with exhilaration filled his chest.

“Allen’s passed this road many times before, right?!” Krena asked excitedly.

“Presumably,” Dogora replied. Although he sounded brusque, he could not deny that it felt odd thinking of how he was now tracing the same path Allen had trodden all those years ago similarly heading out to hunt great boars.

“C’mon, Krena, you promised me that you’d be good and follow along properly,” Gerda chided when he saw his daughter looking around busily, starting and stopping at times.

As always, she replied with an energetic “Yep!” and a bright smile that gave no clue as to whether she was really listening or not.

Gerda threw up his hands and turned to Rodin. “By the way, you think there’ll be a lot again this year?”

The other man nodded. “Chances are high.”

“A lot?!” Krena perked up, her eyes sparkling. “Of boars?!”

Rodin sighed. “That’s right. And that’s why we have to stay careful.”

The group continued making their way to the hunting ground within the nearby forest, chatting the whole time. When they arrived, Pekej, the leader of the group in charge of drawing monsters over, said he would scout out the situation and quickly disappeared into the trees.

He returned less than half an hour later.

“How was it?” Rodin asked. “A lot again, just like last year?”

Pekej nodded. “Yeah, the whole place is chock-full with them. If we mess this up, someone could get hurt.”

“That said, thanks to His Lordship, we’re all equipped with all this nice armor,” Gerda cut in, waving a hand dismissively. “With the numbers we’ve got, I doubt any of us’d get seriously hurt.”

By “thanks to His Lordship,” Gerda had been referring to the leatherworker that Lord Granvelle had arranged to set up shop in Krena Village. This leatherworker was the person who was equipping the hunting party members with better and better armor.

Everyone present today, aside from Krena and Dogora, were veterans who had surpassed multiple Trials of the Gods before. There were more than enough of them to handle the situation even if a great boar rampaged a little.

“That may be so, but we’ll still do our best to lure the smaller groups over,” Pekej said before heading off once more, accompanied this time by his teammates.

While waiting, Gerda suddenly asked, “Why do you think there are suddenly so many great boars?” Although having so much game was a good thing, he couldn’t help feeling uneasy not knowing the reason.

“I heard that it’s because the goblins that used to eat them are all gone,” Rodin replied in a low voice.

“Huh?! What does that mean?!”

“Shh! Keep it down. Some adventurers that visited the village said that the number of goblins in the area suddenly plummeted.”

“You serious? Bad enough that it’s affecting the boar population? What the hell could be doing it?”

“It’s only a rumor, but I’ve also heard that it might be a new type of monster that entered the area and is wiping out the goblins. Don’t tell anyone else, though, all right? We don’t want to be getting people all riled up over unconfirmed rumors.”

It was true, however, that great boar was very plentiful this year. They would probably meet the quota of twenty set by the feudal lord in no time at all. That said, there was too little information to speculate any further, so the two men switched gears back to focusing on the hunt.

Slightly less than an hour later, Pekej’s shout rang out. “Sorry, I’ve got three on me!” He then immediately burst into the clearing, three great boars charging at top speed right at his heels.

Gerda barked a laugh. “What was that about doing your best to lure smaller groups over?” He turned to the rest of the hunting party, who were already in position. “You lot, get ready! They’re coming!”

“YES, SIR!” the villagers shouted, gripping their spears and bracing themselves.

The ground shuddered under the approach of the three giant beasts, but the front wall led by Gerda managed to absorb their momentum and stop

their charges. The three shields in use bent sharply under the boars' horns, fangs, and tusks but otherwise held fast.

The strain of holding three great boars back at the same time prompted Gerda to shout, "Rodin, hurry!"

"I know!" Rodin replied before addressing his team. "You lot, focus on taking down one boar at a time!"

"YES, SIR!" they roared back, surging forward.

To Gerda's consternation, he heard Krena's high-pitched, childish "YAAAAAHH!" cutting through the other voices. It was then that he realized he had not previously gone over what number counted as too many enemies and became too dangerous for her to join in.

He shouted, "Wait, Krena!" but was too late. Before he could stop her, Krena had already jabbed her long spear into the forehead of one of the great boars. Right next to her was Dogora, who had done the same.

"It's so tooooough!" Krena exclaimed at the same time Dogora grunted, "Ugh, we're not getting through."

The two spears that had landed on the monster's forehead refused to go any further. The hide in this area was extremely thick and sturdy. This was why the hunters normally avoided the head and aimed for the neck.

Before long, the finishing team led by Rodin brought down one of the other great boars.

"Huh? I suddenly...feel so much stronger!"

"Th-This is..."

Krena and Dogora, who had been trying to push their spears in deeper with all their might this whole time, suddenly felt a lot stronger. They had earned XP as well when Rodin and his team killed the first beast.

Crack.

"Aw, my spear snapped."

The wooden haft of Krena's spear had given out, crushed as it was between her newfound strength and the monster's tough hide. Krena hurriedly grabbed onto Dogora's spear.

"Huh?! What are y— Okay, let's defeat it together!"

"Yep!"

The two children gripped the spear tightly and stabbed at the great boar with all their might. Soon, Rodin's team killed their second boar, causing Dogora's and Krena's levels to go up once again.

"Hnngghhh!"

"Wait, y—"

The incredible strength coming from Krena that Dogora felt through the spear prompted him to cry out. Before he could form a coherent sentence, however, Krena's feet dug into the ground so hard that the earth was turned over. Refusing to fall behind, Dogora did the same. Their combined efforts drove the spear deeper, deeper, ever deeper.

"GUMOOOOOOHHHH!"

Finally, Dogora and Krena's spear penetrated the great boar's forehead and buried itself deep inside its skull. Blood sprayed everyone as the massive beast fell over with a resounding crash.

"Yay! We did it!" Krena threw up both hands in celebration as the jaws of the rest of the hunting party dropped in astonishment.

No one had managed to kill a great boar by piercing its forehead before. Everyone's general understanding was that going for the neck was the best they could do. The adults stared at the ten-year-olds, marveling at the potential of those with Talents.

However, the adults were not the only ones staring at Krena; Dogora was as well. Because he had been gripping the same spear, he could tell how much stronger she was than him. It felt like she had suddenly gone somewhere really far away.

"I *will* become a champion," Dogora said out loud. "I swear I will."

It was after Dogora met Allen and Krena—the boy with strange abilities who saved the village, and the girl born with the Talent of Sword Lord—that this wish had budded within him. When he was younger, he dreamed of becoming a knight. When he got to know Allen and Krena, however, his dream had changed to wanting to become a champion of the people. Unwittingly, his dream was growing bigger and bigger.

Dogora clenched a fist as his eyes blazed with spirit.

Afterword

Thank you so much for purchasing this book. This is the afterword. Thanks to all of you, here we are with volume 2 of *Hell Mode*. I really cannot thank you enough for all the support you've shown. Thank you.

What's more, here you are reading this afterword despite this book being so much thicker and longer than normal light novel volumes. There are truly no words to describe the gratitude I feel.

Now, since this is an afterword, I'll be writing about what I think about *Hell Mode* as its author.

To be honest, I feel like it's only after you finish reading volume 2 that you get a general feel for the world within Hell Mode. It's been a bit of a long prologue so far, but this is basically the story of a boy being reincarnated as a serf in a tiny village setting off to learn more about the world, all while finding his own purpose and making friends along the way. There was so much world-building to introduce, including the protagonist's background and the overall problem threatening this world, that this word count simply could not be lowered any further.

Now that the series is being officially published, I do want to write more content that I haven't been able to get to before. The web novel version of this work is extremely focused on the protagonist, Allen. There are very few cutaways to other characters' points of view, and as of the more than three hundred chapters that had been uploaded so far, not once have I written a side story.

The razor focus does make the telling of the story go faster, but it's also true that progressing the story simply based on Allen's perspective does leave something to be desired. This is why I plan on writing more side and bonus stories spotlighting other characters. I hope this would shed some light on what some of Allen's friends—such as Krena, Dogora, and Cecil—and their families are thinking and how they are experiencing everything that's going on.

Considering how high my word count is for the afterword, I want to talk a bit about my experiences with gaming as well. As you can tell from the fact that I'm writing about a reincarnated gamer, I absolutely love gaming. The first game I picked up was the second iteration of a certain nationally popular role-playing game on the Famicom. It seemed to just show up in my house one day, machine and all, though my memory is somewhat fuzzy after so long. One of my family members must have bought it for me. Ever since then, the idea that "video game equals role-playing game" had become deeply impressed upon my young self.

At the time—and I think I was in my second year in elementary school?—I was fighting slimes around the starting castle but had failed to figure out that you had to actually put equipment on for it to take effect. This is why

my very first memory was thinking, “Oh no, slimes are so strong. I’ll seriously die if I bump into a few of them at once!”

My second memory was “I wrote down the revival chant properly but it seems wrong.” I clearly remember having done so even more painstakingly than I took notes in class. Many games back then would probably be considered too difficult nowadays. There were far too few hints for how to progress, and I remember dropping several due to getting hopelessly stuck mid-game.

Due to the powerful influence from back then, I now tend to take a very analytical approach whenever I come across something I don’t know. If I don’t have the answer, then I would try every single possibility. That, or maybe I had been born with this from the start.

Despite my love for games, however, I unfortunately haven’t touched them for years now, ever since I first started reading novels on Shosetsuka ni Naro. To be more exact, it’s been around three years and counting. Part of it is because I really don’t have the time anymore juggling a full-time corporate job and writing on the side, but it’s also because I know my life would just fall apart if I pick up a game again. I can bet that I’d just completely dedicate myself to playing it, putting in the minimum amount of effort needed to coast along at work and abandoning all my other duties.

On a different note, this series got a manga adaptation! I had never even imagined that my work would get adapted so soon after I started writing. Tetta Enji-sensei is doing a wonderful job drawing it in the style of shonen manga magazines. There are so many amazing depictions of Allen, his friends, his Summons, the fights with monsters, and so much else. It’s being published by Comic Earth Star, so please go check it out! I’m really looking forward to the day I get to see volume 1 lined up on the shelves in bookstores.

I’d love to see you again for volume 3 of *Hell Mode*. I do hope to continue writing more stories in the future, so please continue supporting me! So long!

Thank you
so much!!
Mo

CECIL
ALLEN

Bonus Short Stories

Bonus Story 1: Keel Heads to the Academy

New Year's had just passed, and it was shiveringly cold. A man pushed open the thick, wooden doors of the church and stepped inside.

"I'm sorry, Sister! I messed up!"

"Again? Goodness, I told you to be careful! You aren't getting any younger. Did you fall off a building again?"

The woman referred to as "Sister" approached the man, her brows drawn together into a frown. She reached out and grabbed the arm he was cradling to diagnose it.

"Yeah, I— OW! Can't you be gentler?!"

"This injury might be bone-deep." The nun then called out, "Keel! Do you still have MP left for the day?"

Upon being called by name, a boy who had been cleaning the floor set down his mop and came over.

"Yes, Sister. I think so."

"Then please help this man."

The man turned Keel's way and presented his upper arm. The boy held out his open hands and closed his eyes.

"Heal," he murmured.

His hands glowed with a light that slowly transferred to the man's wound. When the light faded, the man's eyes widened in astonishment.

"Well, I'll be! It doesn't hurt anymore! Thanks, kid. Now I can get back to work this afternoon."

"My pleasure, sir."

The man untied the sling and bandages to examine his miraculously recovered arm. As he said his thanks, he ruffled the boy's spiky blonde hair, but the boy grimaced and ducked away.

"Goodness," the Sister tutted. "Can't you at least rest on a day like this?"

"'Fraid not, Sister. I can't just leave all the work to the young'uns, can I?" The man shot a glance at the clock hanging on the wall, then hurriedly made his way to the door. "Money in here, right?" He threw a few silvers into the donation pot placed beside the entrance on his way out.

"Oh dear, look at the time," the nun exclaimed upon checking the clock herself. "Here's a little something for your lunch." She produced a silver coin from her pocket and placed it in Keel's hand, closing his fingers over it.

"A-Are you sure about giving me this much again?"

"Of course. Thank you for always working hard and doing such a good job. With how many mouths you have to feed, a single meal can't be cheap, right?"

"Th-Thank you, Sister."

“So, make sure that you eat up too, okay?” The kindly woman cupped Keel’s gaunt cheeks in her hands. The boy looked so haggard that it pained her heart. “You look even thinner than when you first came here.”

“I-I will, Sister. I’ll be out for lunch, then. I’ll see you again in the afternoon.”

Keel hurried to the nearby market, where he purchased more bread than one single person could eat, plus a few other cheap selections. With bags close to bursting in hand, he made his way to a section of streets lined with dilapidated huts. These were the lodgings that the church had available for those with nowhere else to go.

When Keel approached a certain house, he noticed an ornate carriage parked out front. Alarm bells went off in his head, prompting him to pick up his pace. He quickly ducked underneath the sheet that served as the front door.

“Are you okay, Nina?!” he cried as he burst inside.

“Keel!” Nina, the boy’s younger sister, exclaimed with relief. She was sitting at a table, surrounded by a protective group of slightly older boys and girls trying—but failing—to hide the fear on their faces.

A man in a luxurious outfit who was casually lounging in the seat across from Nina’s looked up. “So, you’re Keel,” he said with a sneer that raised the hair on Keel’s arms. “Took you a while. I’ve been waiting for you.”

“Wha— Who the hell are you?!”

“How dare you! You would do well to mind your language!”

The lavishly dressed man was not alone—knights wearing expensive-looking full plate armor stood behind him. They reacted with anger to Keel’s disrespectful choice of words, prompting frightened squeals from two children around Nina’s age who were embracing each other in terror. An even younger pair started bawling, creating an ear-splitting ruckus.

“Come on, don’t scare them.” The mystery man stuffed fingers in his ears while admonishing his knights. “Now you’ve gone and made a racket.”

“Shall we finish them off, then, my lord?”

There was a glint of naked steel as two swords slowly slid out from their sheaths.

“Don’t bother. You’ll just dirty my clothes.” The ostentatious-looking man waved a hand dismissively. He apparently cared more about his expensive outfit than the children’s lives.

Keel settled into the seat next to Nina’s, then asked in the calmest voice he could muster, “Would I be correct in assuming that you are a noble, my lord? May I ask what brings you here today, my lord?”

Someone attended to by knights wearing such impressive armor had to be a noble with significant standing. Something had to be afoot for such a person to visit a place like this. If he let the younger ones continue making a fuss, there was no telling when the knights might lose their patience. The slow and measured way Keel spoke to the noble prompted Nina to suppress

her shaking and look up with a steady gaze. The other children fell silent once more.

“Good, very good. I like that attitude of yours. But first, there’s something I have to confirm with you, Keel. Is it true that you possess the Cleric Talent?”

“Uh, yes, my lord. It’s true.” Keel gave the man a dubious look. I’ve been employed at the nearby church for the past two to three months for my Talent. Why come all the way here when he could have just asked the church?

“Good, just as I’d heard.” The man reached out his hand, palm up. One of his knights nodded and handed him a pouch. Upon accepting it, he promptly loosened the cord tying the opening of the pouch and turned it over, emptying its contents. More than ten gold coins fell out, clinking softly onto the table.

Keel’s eyes shot wide open. “My lord?! I’m sorry, wh-what is this?”

“Travel expenses and the Academy’s examination fee. If there’s any leftover, use it however you want.”

“Th-The Academy?” Although Keel knew of the Academy and Academy City, he could not understand why the noble would be bringing them up.

“That’s right. Keel, you will be attending the Academy starting the month after next. That is what I have come here to tell you today.”

“But, my lord… Me? The Academy? …After all this time?”

“There’s no problem. And if you do well, you will get what you want.”

“I’m sorry, what do you mean, my lord?”

“Well…”

The extravagantly dressed man explained the circumstances behind why he wanted Keel to attend the Academy. When he finished, Keel decided to accept his offer.

It would be quite a while yet before Keel and Allen’s first meeting.

Bonus Story 2: In the Silver Garden

Several days had passed since the New Year’s Greeting. While a maidservant helped her get dressed, Cecil gazed out her window at House Granvelle’s prided garden for no particular reason. After the previous night’s snowfall, the garden was now completely blanketed in white. Cecil continued staring blankly at the beautiful virgin snow unmarred by footsteps as she cast her thoughts to the celebration that had taken place a few days prior.

This year, the Greeting had been far grander than ever before. Allen had brought back monsters from the foothills of the White Dragon Mountains that he rarely hunted, and the head chef had used those ingredients to truly outdo himself. It had been so well received that Cecil had heard guests gushing about how only a chef with experience in the royal palace would have been able to achieve such mouth-watering perfection.

The maidservant held out a jewelry box, and after picking out a pair of mithril earrings and checking how they looked in the mirror, Cecil called out toward the door of her room. “Allen, you can come in now.”

“Yes, milady.”

When her personal manservant entered, Cecil slowly turned to face him. “What do you think?” Today, she was wearing one of her best dresses, and her hair was suitably styled, crowned with a beautiful gem-studded ornament from the royal capital. Naturally, this, too, was made of mithril.

“You look absolutely stunning, Lady Cecil.”

“Why, thank you.” Cecil giggled proudly before noticing the look on Allen’s face. “Hm? What’s the matter?” she asked with a querying look.

After all their years together, Cecil recognized that whatever Allen was thinking always showed on his face. This one meant there was something he wanted to say.

“Um, might you spare a bit of your time, milady?”

“Why’re you being so formal?”

Allen looked conflicted. Cecil had never seen him make this particular face before. There was a certain strength to his gaze. She felt a faint heat rising to her cheeks as he continued staring intently at her.

“Actually—”

Knock, knock.

“Lady Cecil, everything is ready,” the voice of the butler announced from beyond the door.

“Thank you, Sebas,” Cecil called out. Then she turned back to Allen. “Sorry, you were saying?”

“I’m sorry. On second thought, I will tell you later.”

“If you say so.”

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The carriage carrying members of House Granvelle rattled down the streets, heading toward the three-story, high-class inn built of stone located in the middle of the city. It soon turned into the cobblestone turnaround in front of the building. The large number of carriages already lined up spoke volumes to the popularity and recognition of the evening’s event.

Just like all the others, the House Granvelle carriage pulled up in front of the entrance of the inn. Allen got out first, then held out a hand and helped Cecil down. Then Sebas and Viscount Granvelle also emerged, with the latter similarly escorting his wife, the viscountess, out of the carriage.

The owner of this inn was the host of tonight’s festivities.

As the lord of this city and of the fiefdom at large, Viscount Granvelle would normally be the one inviting the city’s big shots to his mansion, such as for the New Year’s Greeting that had taken place a few days before. However, accepting invitations to events hosted by others was also an important part of his duties as feudal lord.

After the Greeting, it now was the viscount’s turn to visit with major commerce and industry leaders, influential nobles, and visiting dignitaries

at their homes or wherever they were staying. Cecil recalled hearing Sebas, who normally ran himself ragged arranging the scheduling of the visits in previous years, muttering about being busier than ever.

This inn was the first stop on the itinerary this year.

When the members of the viscount's family passed through the double front doors, they were greeted by the sight of a perfectly polished entrance hall devoid of a single speck of dust. A uniformed employee was waiting to guide them to the party venue. They followed him down red carpeted hallways until eventually coming upon another set of heavy double doors. The doors cracked open, the clamor that had been audible from beyond immediately died down.

The instant the members of House Granvelle took their first steps inside, the venue exploded into thunderous applause. This roar of welcome directed at her family sent Cecil's earrings aquiver.

"Hm, a tad excessive, isn't it?" the viscount murmured.

"It's for good reason, Master," Sebas replied. "You did become a viscount, after all."

Baron Granvelle had become Viscount Granvelle at the start of the year. It was only natural for the influential men and women of the city to celebrate the promotion. However, that was not the only reason for the applause.

Of course, everyone of importance knew about the launch of the mithril mining operations and the resolution of the uproar involving House Carnel. Once they had learned that House Granvelle now wielded the influence and capability to not only go toe-to-toe with but to dismantle House Carnel, all the power brokers in town were desperate to attend the New Year's Greeting.

However, the number of available invitations had been limited. Therefore, those who failed to take part in the Greeting now participated in these events hosted by the local bigwigs in hopes of forging a personal connection with the viscount. Today's list of attendees included not only a great many from Carnel City—capital of the territory now under direct royal management—but also a significant number from the royal capital.

As the applause continued, the owner of the inn approached Viscount Granvelle. This man also managed multiple lodgings and facilities catering to VIPs in the royal capital and several other fiefdoms. Needless to say, he was one of the big shots in this city—in fact, he was one of the most eminent in terms of sheer economic power. When he respectfully offered the viscount a handshake and the other man accepted it, the cheering in the venue roared even louder, shaking not only Cecil's earrings but the very building itself.

There was no telling just how much money the inn owner had spent to make this very moment on this very day happen. It was clearly beyond five hundred—nay, a thousand gold, even. However, despite all that money dedicated to this single night, he must have thought it worthwhile to prove

he had a relationship with Viscount Granvelle in front of all the other movers and shakers in attendance.

Ever since the previous fall, this inn owner had repeatedly—at times forcefully enough to verge on desperate—sought the honor of hosting the first party of the year following the Greeting. This was also information that Sebas had leaked.

It was only recently that House Granvelle had grown slightly more affluent, thanks to Allen's efforts. However, it had undoubtedly been destitute during the viscount's days as baron. Given this, it was difficult for him to dismiss out of hand someone who had played such a crucial part in keeping the city running all this time.

The party then began in earnest, with large crowds immediately forming around the viscount and viscountess. As decided beforehand in the carriage, Cecil quickly stepped away. She walked off—Allen in tow—into the party venue. The room was lit even brighter than daytime thanks to the countless candlestands everywhere.

"It's my first time at such a fancy event," she admitted honestly.

"It makes me glad to see House Granvelle being blessed by so many people," Allen replied.

"But this is all thanks to you. And now you—"

A loud voice suddenly interrupted Cecil. "My! Master Allen! You came!"

It was Fiona, the daughter of the inn owner. She, too, was wearing a dress, her hair and neck decorated with splendid ornaments. She was also twelve years old, same as Allen and Cecil.

"Master Allen, we managed to source some sweets from the royal capital!" Fiona approached with a bright smile and grabbed one of Allen's hands with the intention of pulling him away. "They taste absolutely wonderful. They're just over there!"

However, Cecil stepped in, clearly having none of it. "Oh my, Fiona. What business would you have with *my* personal manservant?" she asked, emphasizing the "my."

Fiona's brows drew together in a scowl as she glared at Cecil. Sparks flew between the two girls' eyes with such intensity that they were practically visible.

"Do you not realize that you are mistreating poor Master Allen?" Fiona asked plainly.

Previously, Allen had put his life on the line saving a mother and daughter from a murdergalsh; this Fiona was the daughter from that time. Ever since then, she had kept trying everything she could to meet with Allen. This involved repeatedly pestering her father to hire Allen at the inn and attending all the tea parties Cecil hosted so as to poach him directly. Even now, she was sending him a look as if to say, "Why do you stay in service to *her*? My father can promise you much better terms and working conditions!" To put it simply, Fiona was infatuated with Allen.

However...

“I’m terribly sorry, Miss Fiona. The sweets sound truly tempting, but...”

Two disbelieving gasps sounded. A beat later, Cecil gasped again at the fact that she had gasped. Given just how big Allen’s sweet tooth was, neither girl had expected Allen to turn down Fiona’s offer. Cecil had instinctively stepped in just because Fiona’s forceful measures ruffled her feathers, but she had intended on eventually letting Allen go if he really wanted to.

The face that Allen had made before they set off for the inn abruptly came to Cecil’s mind. However, when she saw Fiona’s face, she found herself more concerned about this girl, whom she normally could not stand, than Allen—that was just how sad Fiona looked. Cecil flew into a fluster and whirled around, finding Allen gazing at Fiona with firm eyes and a resolute expression.

After a pause, Fiona gathered herself and mumbled, “Please enjoy yourselves.” Cecil noticed the girl clearly trembling as she spoke.

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The viscount’s family returned home before night fell. The party would continue until noon tomorrow, but as guests, they had no obligation to stay the entire time.

When Cecil stepped off the carriage, she said, “Allen, come with me.”

“Of course, milady.”

Leaving her parents behind at the carriage, Cecil headed for the garden. The beautiful snow crunched under her boots as she trudged on. She could hear Allen’s footsteps following close behind.

When she reached the area underneath her window, she turned around, illuminated by the setting sun. “No one will hear us this far in,” she said. “Allen, what’s going on? You even turned down the sweets at the party.”

“Well, about that...” Allen looked straight at Cecil and fell silent.

Cecil returned his look, patiently waiting for him to continue.

A gust of wind blew up behind them, blowing Cecil’s hair forward. The wind then reflected off the wall of the mansion to hit her in the face. Her mithril earrings jangled, pulling at her earlobes.

“Actually, there is…something I must tell you, Lady Cecil.”

“Why’re you being so formal about it?” Suddenly, the thought that Allen might be confessing his love for her crossed her mind and she gasped. “Wait, no! You can’t! You’re my manservant!” she exclaimed, heat blooming on her chilled cheeks.

“The truth is...”

“Y-Yes?”

“Starting this year, I’m now a guest of your family.”

“Huh? What does that mean?”

“It means...this.” Allen produced an ornamented dagger that served as proof of him being House Granvelle’s guest.

Cecil laughed, small chuckles that soon turned into howls that shook her body. She did not know how to react aside from laughing.

“Um, milady…?” Worry crept into Allen’s voice as he approached Cecil. Just as he leaned in to peer into her lowered face—

“How dare you quit being my personal servant without telling me?!” Cecil’s head shot up, daggers shooting from her eyes.

“Eeep! This is why I didn’t want to tell you!”

Cecil’s arms shot out to grab Allen and grapple with him, just like how she had learned in her self-defense lessons, but he managed to slip away and run off. She gave chase, feeling a joyful grin spread over her face.

Soon, the previously untouched silver garden was decorated by two pairs of footsteps in the snow.

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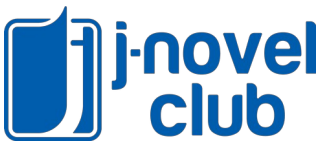

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